



ISUNA
HASEKURA

WOLF
&
PARCHMENT

VOL. 3

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

VISIT...

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WOLF & PARCHMENT

VOL. 3

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA



"I SWEAR..."

"EH-HEH-HEH!"

MYURI GIGGLED, HEADING BACK TOWARD THE FULL TUB TO SIT IN IT.

COL ROLLED UP HIS SLEEVES, DIPPED THE SOAP INTO THE WATER, AND BEGAN TO WASH MYURI'S HAIR ONCE BUBBLES STARTED TO FORM.

HER ONCE-SMOOTH HAIR FELT JUST LIKE THE COARSE FUR OF A WOLF, PERHAPS BECAUSE OF HOW LONG IT HAD BEEN TOUSED BY THE BRINY SEA BREEZE.

THE DAUGHTER OF A
WOLF AND A MERCHANT
MYURI

A YOUNG
MAN ASPIRING
TO BE A PRIEST
COL





“LOOK, BROTHER! THE WORLD IS SO BIG!”

MYURI NOTICED HIM AND SPOKE BEFORE A WIDE-OPEN OCEAN. DEEP IN THE MOUNTAINS OF NYOHHIRA, THE VIEWS FROM THE SUMMIT OF ANY PEAK ONLY WENT SO FAR.

BUT BEFORE THEM, THERE WAS A VAST, NEVER-ENDING SEA.



“MY NAME IS
ILENIA GISELE.
I WAS BORN
AND RAISED IN
A FARAWAY LAND
OF BLUE SEAS.
I WORK FOR A
TRADING FIRM
FROM A DISTANT
COUNTRY, AND
I NORMALLY
BROKER WOOL
IN THE KINGDOM.”

THE MERCHANT
WITH SHEEP HORNS
ILENIA GISELE

SINCE SHE WAS A SHEEP GIRL WHO PURCHASED
WOOL, SHE MUST HAVE BEEN QUITE THE
REPUTABLE BROKER.

HIS THOUGHTS MUST HAVE SHOWN PLAINLY ON
HIS FACE SINCE THE GIRL SMILED CHILDISHLY,
FITTING FOR HER AGE OR AT LEAST FOR HOW
OLD SHE APPEARED TO BE.

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WOLF
&
PARCHMENT
✿NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF✿

VOL. 3

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA


NEW YORK

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WOLF & PARCHMENT, Volume 3

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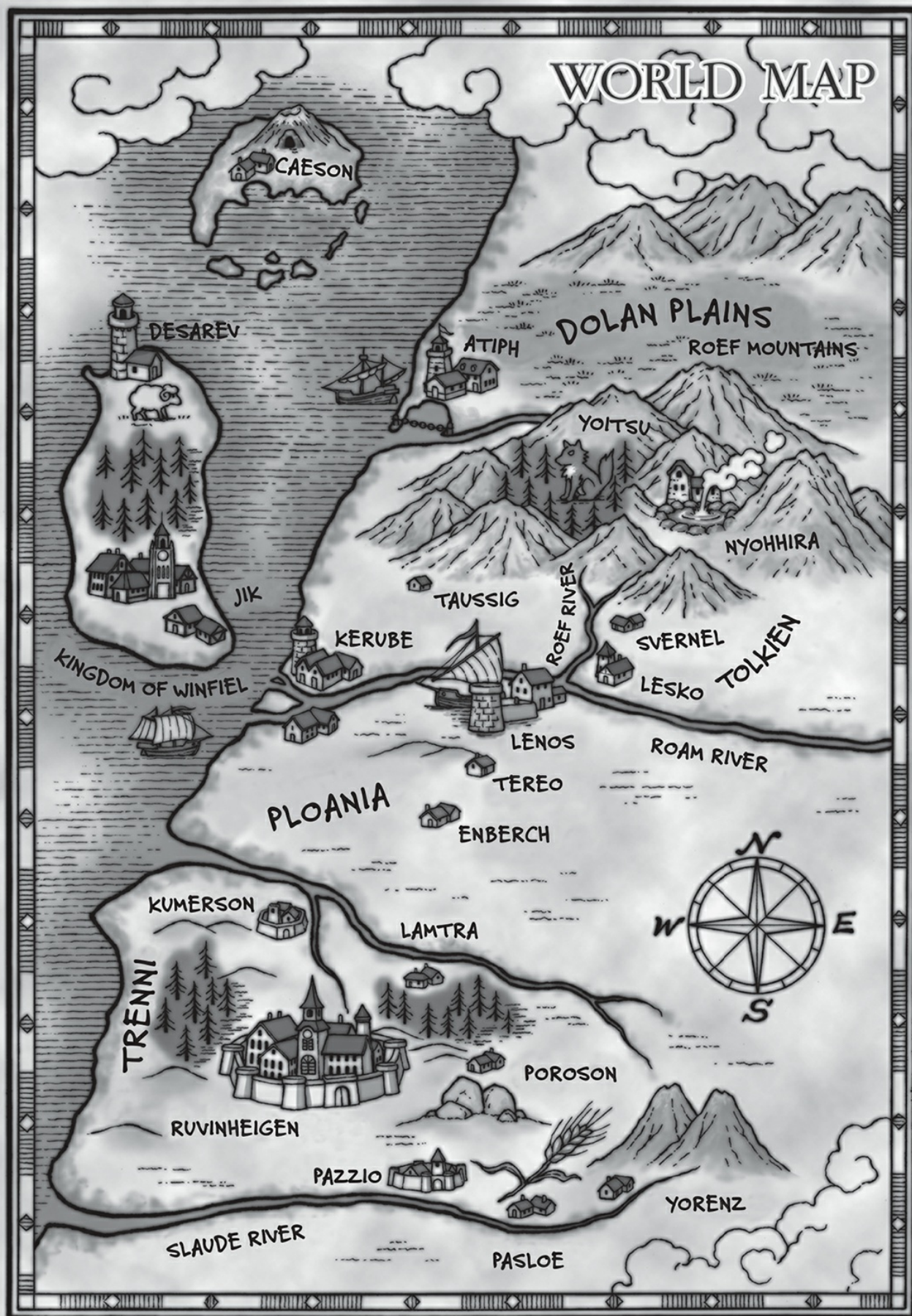
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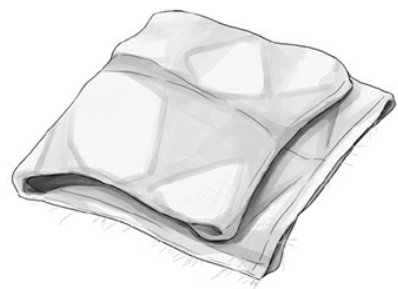
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PROLOGUE



PROLOGUE

Before he realized it, drool had begun trickling from the corner of his mouth. He must have dozed off while he was thinking. Hurriedly, he wiped the dribble away, furrowing his brows at his carelessness.

The ship rocked like a cradle and his lap felt warm. It was only natural that he had quickly succumbed to drowsiness.

He rubbed his eyes as he yawned, causing the girl sleeping in his lap, Myuri, to wriggle in displeasure. She was about twelve or thirteen, old enough to be married off at a young age. For a long time, he had been steeling himself for the havoc her natural tomboyish disposition would wreak at her wedding, but recent events had gone far beyond anything he ever imagined.

Myuri was the daughter of a bathhouse master who he had long served under. She had been in his care since the day she was born. Luckily, she had taken a liking to him and always, always called out for him.

It was only recently he had learned that she felt romantic feelings toward him. This was not a revelation that could be brushed off as something that commonly happened to girls her age. The depth of her feelings only became apparent to him ten days ago, when they had been wrapped up in a serious matter out in the northern islands, which the pirates had made their stronghold.

His motivation for the journey had been to see for himself whether the inhabitants were practicing heresy or following the true faith. It had all been a part of the larger conflict brewing between the Kingdom of Winfiel and the Church. When he first arrived, he discovered the stark reality of poverty that no prayers could fix, as well as the truth of such an unforgiving life.

Not long after, an archbishop who had been dispatched by a large southern trading company as well as the Church arrived at the northern islands. In a place where the people were barely making ends meet, the man of the cloth had

been seeking to advance a dark plot in the hopes of obtaining gold. It practically came down to sheer luck that they managed to drive the archbishop back, and if he had to recognize someone for their hard work, it would be none other than Myuri.

It had been all thanks to her affection for him, which practically bordered on something akin to faith.

He had been thrown off board into the black, freezing sea, and right when he had prepared for death, Myuri leaped into the water after him without hesitation. How many lovers who exchanged their vows could do the same?

Though he was angry with how recklessly she had rushed to act, he could no longer treat her feelings as a mere child's crush.

He patted Myuri as she fidgeted on his lap, making triangular bits of fur on her head twitch. They were an odd color resembling silver flecks mixed into ash, the same as her hair. The curious shapes were in fact wolf ears. Myuri's mother was Holo the Wisewolf, the avatar of a giant wolf who had long resided in wheat, a hunter of the forest who would not allow its prey to escape once it made up its mind.

His instinct as a lamb of God came from a place that was not logical.

But at the same time, Myuri was his little sister.

God would never allow a union between a father and a daughter or a brother and a sister.

He wished she would understand that, but there wasn't much progress.

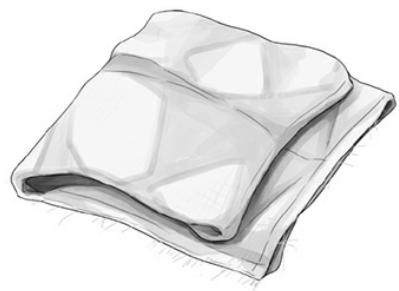
When he looked at the calm, sleeping face on his lap, he could not help but smile bitterly.

It was a problem that gave him a headache, but at the very least, time was going by peacefully.

I pray times like this will continue forever.

He prayed, and as he patted Myuri's head, he closed his eyes again.

CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER ONE

“Brother! Wake up!” Myuri yelled, rousing Col.

He wondered what the matter was as he opened his eyes, realizing they were still in the ship, where it was pitch-black.

They must have reached the port. Yet, he was bewildered, since nothing significant should be happening during their sea voyage at night. Then he felt the ship fall.

After a moment of weightlessness that made him think there must have been a heavy impact, the floor rose violently.

“Grab on!”

The ship’s hold filled with voices while the ship once again fell into a deep plunge. The floor tilted dramatically, sending all the wooden crates and sacks of cargo tumbling. Luckily, most were empty, but a direct impact from any of the flying containers would probably result in major injuries.

Col was unable to maintain his footing, not because of the rocking but from how agitated he was from not knowing what was going on. He instinctively grasped Myuri’s shoulders and searched for a safe place. The only place they could go was up in the hopes that they did not end up trapped like rats among the luggage in the ship’s hold.

Fighting against the violent rocking in the darkness, the two of them managed to reach the ladder, where Col sent Myuri up first.

The tomboy who had been raised in the mountains climbed the ladder with confidence. It was Col, the devout bookworm, who needed her help, but when they managed to get on deck, the wind and rain almost laid them out flat.

“Pull it tighter!”

“We need another on the helm! Don’t let go! If we drift west, we’ll be thrown

out into the open seas!”

It was utter chaos on deck.

The ship had apparently gotten lost under the torrential downpour. Dark, coal-colored clouds covered the sky. Incessant lightning illuminated the shadowy world, granting Col vision of every fold in the ominous clouds overhead.

As they stood dumbstruck, someone clinging to the sail boom faced them and yelled.

But the cry was lost in the thunder. No one could make any of the words out.

Then suddenly a wave crashed into the ship.

It swept the deck and knocked Col off his feet with such force he thought his knees would snap. The mass of water was no different from stone. He could do nothing to fight back as both he and Myuri were washed to the other side of the sail boom.

He felt a hard impact on his back, and after being enveloped in weightlessness again, the deluge engulfed him from his feet to his head while his face was abruptly pressed to the floor.

There was no way he could grasp what was going on.

As he coughed, someone yelled into his ear.

“Brother! Get up!”

He opened his eyes when he heard Myuri’s voice. She was dripping wet, grasping his right hand with both of hers.

“Grab onto the rope!”

Myuri hurriedly looked around, searching for the voice’s source. This time, Col moved and reached out to the rope beside him. At the same time, Myuri pulled Col’s right hand closer to herself. Using her underarm and her chest, she clung to him, mustering all the strength she could in her small body.

The bow of the ship dipped sharply into the water, bringing another rush of salt water onto Col. He couldn’t even feel the chill. The thunder that followed

the blinding lightning was drowned out by the sound of water roaring over the deck.

It was then that finally Col understood the situation.

They had gotten lost in a storm, and the ship felt as though it was made out of leaves.

“Are you okay?”

Col checked over the girl in his arms who was as drenched as a wet kitten.

She coughed, then nodded. “I should be asking you that...Don’t fall into the water! I don’t want to jump in after you again!”

He smiled at her sharp tongue; then he gave her a kiss on the forehead that had been thoroughly cleaned by the wave.

“Are you all right, Sir Col, Miss Myuri?”

A voice could be heard as a person nimbly rushed over to them despite how much the ship yawed.

It belonged to a merchant from the Debau Company who was round as a barrel—Yosef.

“Yes, by God’s grace.”

Col responded right when Yosef covered them to provide some protection from the next oncoming wave. Once the water retreated, he spoke.

“It’s dangerous up here! Please go back downstairs!”

But all the sailors were desperately attempting to adjust the ship’s course.

Yosef’s plea came just as Col was about to ask if there was anything they could do to help.

“Go downstairs and help the other deckhands clear out water from the flooded areas! Then empty all the water barrels we use as weights and tie them tightly together in a bunch with rope! On the off chance that a hole opens up in the bottom of the ship, the mass of empty barrels will maintain quite a bit of buoyancy! And if the need arises, just grab onto it and pray!”

Luckily, there were a great many things for them to do.

“We’ll try our best to keep the ship from drifting out into open water! When the next wave rises, please run!”

The ship dipped into the water once more. By the lightning’s flash, they could see the ridgeline of the cliff-like swells looming overhead.

Then it felt as though they were hoisted into the air with a great force that knocked them to the ground before another surge washed over the deck.

“Now!”

Without even a moment to wipe his face, Col crossed the deck with Myuri close behind, hugging his arm.

Myuri placed a hand on the entrance to the hold and jumped down without using the ladder.

Of course, Col could not imitate her. He lowered himself down the ladder until water fell upon him, making him slip off onto the ground.

“You’d be hopeless without me!”

Myuri laughed at him as she said that, but she was probably right. Col was only able to press on because she was by his side every step of the way. He took her hand and stood up, then quickly set off to do as Yosef had instructed.

Every time the ship lurched, the cargo flew about like unruly cattle. Though he was often called useless and weak, Col had done his fair share of heavy lifting at the bathhouse. He managed to keep his footing while holding the barrels in place, allowing Myuri to pull the plugs out. After that, they simply left the barrels to be tossed around by the waves since the contents would empty out on their own.

Once that was finished, they found the already-empty barrels and used everything at their disposal to keep them in place amid the anarchy, tying three together at a time with some rope Myuri found.

Beside them, the deckhands and other guests were passing along tubs filled with water from even farther below deck, eventually emptying them out a window built into the wall. It seemed as if more water was entering the ship than the amount that was being thrown out, but the entire vessel would sink if

they did nothing. No one complained.

Once they finished binding the barrels together, Myuri and Col also began to help bailing water. Though the tubs did not seem that heavy at a glance, Col learned very quickly that was not the case. He soon found it impossible to pass the lead-heavy pails on to the next deckhand without spilling as the ship careened back and forth. After his fourth failure, he was poked down farther below deck and ended up standing in water that came to his knees and scooping it into the tubs.

But he was much better suited for this task, considering his tall stature and his experience of emptying the baths back home over and over again. He took the tubs that came down to him from above, scooped them full of water to the brim, then passed them back up. The one who took them from him was Myuri, whose form he could occasionally see outlined by the lightning.

They worked in sync as she pulled full tubs from him while he grabbed empty ones from her. Col did not stumble even once while the bottom of the ship continued to flood. There was only a single slab of wood that kept him from the afterlife, but he was not afraid.

There was no way of telling how long it went on. Eventually, Col stopped thinking as well, his hands continuing to move on their own. Suddenly, the tub he swung down collided into the flooring with a *thunk*. The shock brought him to his senses as he realized that at some point the water had receded.

The ship still rocked, but it no longer felt as though the sky was about to be flipped on its head. Storms in the mountains were similarly intense, but it seemed the sea changed on a whim. Still, they had weathered through the worst of it.

Just as Col mused over that, a slight shift sent him falling onto his behind.

His hands and arms were stiff, but he put all his strength into somehow pulling himself up the ladder.

At that very moment, someone came down the ladder and covered his head with dripping wet fur. He immediately knew who it was because of how long the hairs were.

“Brother, are you okay?”

Myuri jumped over his head and landed on the bottom of the ship, shaking herself as hard as she could to dry off her tail.

With that, all the energy he had used up seemed to come back.

“I’m...all right. And...”

When he reached out with an arm he thought had no strength left to move, she grasped his hand.

“...as long as you’re safe.”

Myuri smiled at his words. Col gathered his dignity as her older brother to will himself into standing.

“Well then, let us go back upstairs. We can only get sick from staying down here.”

Though it was not deep enough to scoop up anymore, there was still a layer of frigid seawater in the bottom of the ship. They would freeze before long if they sat down here. With Myuri’s help, who had already concealed her ears and tail, Col unsteadily made his way up the ladder and returned to the main part of the hold.

Annoyingly, a brilliant sunset shone through the window cut into the wooden wall.

The tired deckhands and guests were all lying about the floor like beached fish. Yosef, in a very captain-like manner, stepped over them while silently counting everyone. When he noticed Col and Myuri, he gave a big smile, happy to confirm their safety. That must have meant that no one had been thrown overboard.

The violent winds had pushed them far off course, but apparently they would be able to stop at a nearby port shortly.

“That was a disaster.”

Col leaned against the wall and spoke as he removed his shoes, emptying the water from them. More moisture spilled from his coat when he wrung it out. Myuri sat next to him, her wet hair glistening in the sunset as she responded.

“It’s not a disaster. It’s an adventure.”

Speaking with her could transform even the cruelest circumstances into the setting of a wondrous journey.

Col’s expression softened at her radiant optimism as the last of his stress dissipated.

“I’m going to rest my eyes for a bit.”

“Okay.”

Myuri spread his wrung-out coat over him, then slipped under it, too, as though it was entirely normal. While she was at it, she brushed away a bit of hair that had stuck to his cheek and shamelessly gave him a kiss.

She committed the crime with knowing full well that he did not have the energy to scold her for it.

“G’night.”

Keeping his irritation to himself, he slid the coat more toward Myuri, then fell asleep.

In the end, the ship had been pushed out farther west than their planned route, which apparently made a harbor called Desarev their first port of call. This was unconfirmed because sleeping on the floor of a dreary vessel had only made Col even more tired, leaving him indisposed in the ship’s hold. Instead, Myuri, who had regained her energy much sooner, went up on deck to listen to what the sailors were talking about.

“Brother, Brother, it sounds like a really big town.”

“Really? Well...it seems we’ve gone quite off course.”

Col groaned as he gazed at the map of the sea, which included the island kingdom of Winfiel as well as the port towns along the coast of the mainland that bordered the strait. The name Desarev was at the northern tip of the Kingdom of Winfiel.

“Was it Atiph that we were headed for?”

From the side, Myuri peered at the map as she spoke.

Their destination was not the port town of Atiph but a port in the Kingdom of Winfiel called Rausbourne.

“Didn’t that blondie tell us to head over there? We don’t have to go, right?”

Myuri spoke with a calm expression.

“That blondie” she mentioned was Hyland, a respectable noble who had inherited the blood of the Winfiel royal family. She was a wonderful individual, fervent in her faith, both courageous and wise, and a lord born to lead the people—but Myuri was very critical of her.

She suspected that the respect Col afforded Hyland was actually something else.

It was true that Hyland was a gallant and beautiful woman. Moreover, she certainly possessed a charm that Myuri did not.

“Yes, we do. She most likely pointed out a specific location because something is happening there.”

Col and Myuri had entrusted a letter detailing the events in the northern islands to a fast ship that would arrive a week earlier than the vessel they traveled on.

It was about two days ago that a response to their message arrived while they were still in the town of Caeson. Once they received it, they departed from the islands.

“Hmph. Well, whatever. I’m excited to go somewhere new.”

In the village of Nyohhira, deep in the mountains, Myuri would always pester the guests who visited the bathhouse about where they came from, and she would have them draw a map. Considering that, it was unlikely she would be bored on this journey.

“By the way, where’s the town you went to a long time ago, Brother?”

“Well, that was even farther south than Rausbourne...”

As they conferred over the map, it was not long before their ship arrived in the port of Desarev.

They could tell how lively the harbor was before they even emerged onto the deck just from the seabird cries that penetrated the hold. Myuri begged Col to climb up, exclaiming that the town was far livelier than Atiph. It had a reputation as a major trade port even after taking the whole of the kingdom into consideration. At the least, they would be able to enjoy warm food and not have to spend the night in a damp ship.

Col and Myuri gazed out from the deck as they slowly made their way deeper into the harbor. There they could see that many of the ships were soaked and sparkling brightly in the sunset. There were ships with crooked booms, and other vessels where the crew sat hunched beneath ripped sails. Col could tell that most of them had fled to Desarev to shelter from the earlier storm or had washed up here.

On average, it appeared that Yosef's ship, which had carried them from islands considered the stronghold of pirates who worshipped the Black-Mother, had weathered the squall rather better than most.

When Col mentioned that, he was told that sailors from the north would have sensed the storm coming from far away and avoided it in the first place.

At the moment, the Kingdom of Winfiel was in a standoff with the Church. It was expected that war would soon break out around these waters. Being able to call those northern sailors their allies was an unexpected blessing for Winfiel.

As he thought about how all this was thanks to Myuri, he turned to face her. It was at that moment he noticed.

She was gazing out at the harbor while gripping his hand so hard it hurt.

He was surprised—perhaps his thoughts had managed to reach her.

“Is something the matter?”

Myuri answered, her eyes wide and seemingly on the brink of tears.

“It smells like sheep!”

Then her stomach roared with a great rumble.

He could not find it in himself to be irritated at how relaxed she was. Perhaps this was what it meant to thrive in the world.

Col gripped her hand in return, breathing in a lungful of the air of a port full of people and ships, and spoke.

“I hope we’ll be able to have a hot meal.”

Myuri looked up at him, then flashed him a smile as warm as the evening sun.

What stood out the most about the port town of Desarev was the massive cape around it. Its shape resembled a white bird lifting its head, and the town had been built in a way that made it seem like the wings spreading from the cape’s base protected it.

At the cape’s highest point stood a bell tower and a large cathedral that reached up even farther. Apparently, there was a fire burning constantly beside the bell at the top. Sailors who had been visited by disaster would cling to their last hope while trying to make their way to Desarev.

Moreover, the harbor was so deep it was practically bottomless, meaning even large vessels could dock. The energy of the port itself was many more times greater than what Col and Myuri had seen in Atiph. This was the main trading hub for mutton, wool, as well as other processed goods from the northern part of the kingdom, including their famous burning liquor, distilled from the region’s abundant peat; in exchange, wine, wheat, and a whole plethora of other imports flowed in from the south. The amount of alcohol that came and went was particularly impressive, as evidenced by barrels marked with insignias of distilleries that were stacked up all over.

It was hard to imagine an unlively Desarev given the sheer presence of alcohol and mutton. Not only was the wind not as biting as it was in the northern islands the climate was also more temperate, providing residents with the perfect weather to drink and enjoy a good time outside.

As the sun began to set, it actually seemed as though the people out on the street became even livelier.

“Myuri, stay close to me.”

As Col kept his eye on Yosef’s back in order to keep track of him, he reached back to grasp her hand as he always did—only to find that she was already gone.

Flustered, he called out to stop Yosef, who had been leading the way. Col looked right then left, quickly spotting Myuri's petite frame in front of a stand selling mutton skewers. Hypnotized by the mouthwatering scent of sizzling fat and the pleasant smoky aroma, she seemed as if she was about to poke her head right in.

There were few sheep and goats in the nearly-barren northern islands. There were no pigs, and chickens were nonexistent. Col and Myuri had on occasion been treated to sea creatures that the islanders sometimes caught, but the meat was watery, tasted of blood, and was not very palatable in general.

On the other hand, the mutton from the Kingdom of Winfiel was renowned throughout the world. Even Col, who was trying to avoid eating meat as often as possible, felt his mouth water at the sight of a mutton skewer, knowing that the sweet fat would gush out with a single juicy bite.

Myuri looked back at him before he could call out to her, and he found it hard to resist her gaze.

"Hah, hot! Hauff!"

"Come on now, don't eat so fast."

Of course, she did not listen. She stuffed her cheeks with the searing-hot mutton while her eyes watered. Given the circumstances, they may very well have been tears of joy.

At any rate, Col's expression slowly gave way to a smile as he took in the peaceful sight.

He was thankful that they were able to partake of such good food by the grace of God.

He would also have to visit the large cathedral later to give thanks for both of them making it out of the storm without a scratch.

"Let's be on our way, you two."

Yosef happily watched their exchange before guiding them to a corner of the main street, where the most magnificent buildings in town stood in rows. They had reached a trading house belonging to the Debau Company, the group that

Yosef worked with. This was where they planned to stay the night.

The loading area, which faced the street, was large enough to fit a small manor. Evening was becoming night and the large wooden doors were mostly closed, but through the gap, Col could see many merchants still working.

Beside the loading area was the main entrance, which was every bit as magnificent as the rest. The Debau Company's banner was draped over the wall while torches had been lit on either side. Myuri, who had only recently left the mountain hot spring village of Nyohhira, was speechless while she stared up in shock at the trading house.

The architecture was so impressive that Col was a bit worried about whether two travelers in their current attire would really be allowed to stay there.

"Hey, Brother, do you think they'll make us go through the stable?"

Their clothes were, of course, just as damp as they were before. Plus, they were starting to smell like the sea.

As Yosef entered the building in high spirits, Col thought that such a thing could be avoided if Yosef explained their circumstances, but he was still uneasy. As Col and Myuri waited in front of the entrance, he became even more conscious of the merchants and artisans who passed by them.

A chilly wind caused Myuri to sneeze, and Col offered his coat to her.

"Well, well, my friends! You've finally made it!"

The door swung open to reveal a noble-looking young gentleman, his strawberry blond hair styled in the shape of a wave. The man was not the sort of merchant who traveled from place to place himself, nor was he the sort who fiddled with scales. This man was the very picture of a person who managed a large company and moved people about with his words. He removed his brightly bleached gloves and gave Col a fervent handshake.

"My name is Edwin Sligh. I am the master of this trading house!"

"H-how very polite of you. I am Tote Col. And this is..."

"I am Myuri. Thank you for having us."

She was unusually polite, probably because she was expecting hot food and a

soft bed.

Sligh also shook hands with Myuri, then quickly invited them inside. Yosef needed to collect some funds to purchase necessities for the ship, so after exchanging a few words with Sligh, he headed toward the loading area.

Once Col and Myuri were whisked inside, they looked around in astonishment at the sets of armor and giant tapestries that decorated the stone entranceway. The atmosphere was different compared to what they remembered of the trading house in Atiph, almost resembling a noble's mansion. The uniformed maids who stood at either side of the hall all bowed their heads in choreographed unison.

One glance was all it took for Col to see how well-off they were.

As they proceeded down the corridor leading from the entrance, they came to a hall that seemed connected to the loading area. There was the familiar sight of a merchant accounting room—errand boys ran here and there, their arms filled with bundles of parchment, while elderly merchants sat at the rows of desks, scribbling away with quill pens.



“First, please change. You two look appalling.”

Col’s cheeks flushed at Sligh’s sudden jab—their appearance was rather terrible.

The young-looking house master called out to a person working under a tapestry depicting sheep, then politely motioned toward Col and Myuri.

“Please pick out some clothes for these two.”

The worker glanced at them briefly, then opened a closet stuffed to the ceiling with rolls of cloth. It was as though every single piece of fabric in the world was stuffed inside.

“Well then, I shall lead you to your room.”

After they passed through the hall, the floor changed from stone to wood. The handrail on the stairs was made of meticulously polished brass, and the candles in the stands along the wall gave off the sweet aroma of beeswax.

When Col had visited the kingdom during his youth, it had experienced a slump in wool exports so the economy had been in a recession. Things had certainly changed.

“At any rate, for you to come here, Sir Col, means that God has arranged things ever so delicately. Once they hear about this, the troubled masses from lands surrounding Desarev will all come together!”

Sligh spoke as they went up the stairs.

“Do you really think so?”

Col responded with a bitter smile, causing Sligh to stop in his tracks and turn around, nodding his head with an earnest expression.

“The last place the Ruvik Alliance’s massive ships stop for supplies before heading north is the Desarev harbor. They were trying to hide it, but we could easily tell there were high-ranking clergy on board. It all made us very nervous—what were they doing up north?”

Sligh spoke about the ship sent north by the Church, which stood opposed to the kingdom, in order to persuade the northern pirates to support their

interests. They loaded their vessel with mountains of gold with the intent to buy the destitute people as slaves to serve as hostages.

“Each company ordered some of their own to head north and gather information. That’s where many of them witnessed a miracle. That arrogant trading company and the archbishop from the south brought the anger of the Black-Mother upon themselves. Just deserts!”

Like a child, Sligh lifted both of his arms into the air and smiled before turning on his heel so quickly it let out a *squeak* as he continued forward.

“As they learned more about the situation, we discovered that it was not only the monk who kept the northern seas together who had helped but a single priest as well. But no one knew who it could be. Then Mr. Yosef told me that person was you, Sir Col.”

The man seemed of proper nobility, but the way he walked was just like a merchant.

He walked restlessly with wide strides, eventually stopping before a door.

“Furthermore, you are also the one who tackled the vernacular translation of the scripture with Heir Hyland from the royal family, cracked down on the greedy priests in Atiph, and even lit the first flame that awoke the masses to true faith! That story has already spread wide throughout the kingdom!”

Col honestly felt that it was sheer coincidence that he had been in the right place at the right time when those events occurred. He wanted to shrink away. Not to mention that what had been done in the northern islands was 99 percent Myuri’s accomplishment.

But seeing him feel troubled over being unable to explain all the details, Sligh assumed it was virtuous humility.

“Sir Col, you truly are a wonderful person. For the kingdom, which has ceaselessly and unjustly suffered under the pope’s tyranny, you are a living legend. When the minstrels sing about you in the taverns, they call you by another name!”

“Another name?”

Sligh placed his hand on the door and opened it dramatically, then spoke.

“The Twilight Cardinal! You are the one meant to bring us the dawn of our faith!”

No way. Col wanted to laugh, but the furnishings inside the room Sligh had led them to were no joke.

“Please make use of these rooms. They are the best in the house!”

Col was surprised they had been let into a suite on the second floor of a five- or six-story building. Generally speaking, the higher up in a building, the simpler the decor became. Smoke from fires burning downstairs gathered at the top as well, leaving residents on upper floors feeling like smoked fish. Rooms on the second floor were typically for the master or esteemed guests.

There was an excellent fireplace in the room they entered, meaning there was no need to rely on the ambient heat of the building.

Col stared in surprise at the canopied bed, and even Myuri, who was normally fond of such luxury, had frozen with a half smile on her face. On the wall hung a giant tapestry depicting an angel holding a scale in one hand and a sword in the other, like what they saw in Atiph. The strength of coin was very apparent.

“Please feel free to order anything you like before you set off for Rausbourne. At present, we’re hurrying to warm the water, so please enjoy a leisurely stroll through town before your bath. The storm from earlier has passed, so the air is clear and the fires in town resemble glittering jewels. After your bath, we’ll prepare supper for you. You must be exhausted after your long journey, so we’ll bring it here. Are you hungry for anything in particular?”

A cascade of words flowed from Sligh’s mouth.

Col could only stand there like a buffoon, since he was also overwhelmed by the room before him.

“Er, um, well...I suppose, anything warm will do.”

“No need to be so reserved! But of course, we would not want to interfere with the temperance of a holy lamb of God. We shall prepare some modest fare for you.”

It was at this point that Myuri gripped Col's sleeve tightly. Wordlessly, she mouthed to him, *Meat*. Just one or two skewers would not satisfy her. She had eaten enough fish for a lifetime during their time in the north.

He wanted to continue with his simple diet for as long as possible, but if he forced her to hold back after such an offer, she might actually burst into tears.

"I'm truly sorry, but do you think you might be able to prepare lamb meat or something similar for the girl?"

"Oh! Of course! She shall have nothing but the finest."

Sligh responded enthusiastically, but Col still felt a bit nervous that he might have an entire roast prepared for them.

"Well then, please make yourselves at home."

Sligh placed his hand to his chest, bowed, then closed the door as he left.

Immediately afterward, the strain in Col's shoulders dissipated.

But still, the Twilight Cardinal?

He thought it sounded ridiculous.

"This isn't the stable, but it sure is big enough for a horse."

Myuri walked about the spacious room, gazing at everything, giving her impression of the space as she opened the door to the next room.

"This is too much for us."

Everything in their bags had been drenched in seawater, but it could likely all be salvaged after a bit of drying.

"But did you hear that, Brother?"

There was a chair with a cushion stuffed full of wool and embroidered with gold thread sitting along the wall. Myuri poked it with her finger, a smile on her face as she spoke.

"He called you the 'Twilight Cardinal.' You're a big shot now."

"It would be quite the joke if I seriously accepted that."

"Aw, really? I think having another name is cool, like in an adventure story."

Then, when they call you ‘Your Eminence,’ even you would have to stand up straight, despite how pitiful you are.”

Within the hierarchy of the Church, cardinals were next in importance after the pope. Everyone had titles and names that suited them. To be called by a name that did not match his true worth felt absurd.

As Col sighed in slight irritation, there was a knock at the door. Some errand boys and maids had arrived with a large tub as well as several wooden buckets filled with hot water. They carried it all into the next room, and the ones who followed in after the first group drew a rope across the wall from which they hung cloth, like a curtain.

“Please let us know if you need more water. Your new clothes will be over here.”

It was far grander than what Col had asked for, so he could not help but feel indebted. The maid who spoke bowed one last time before leaving the room.

While Col had been talking with them, Myuri had immediately stripped off her clothes before pouring the water right over her head. Exasperated, he collected her scattered clothes, and her carefree voice came from the other side of the curtain.

“I feel alive again!”

Bathing was too much to ask for in the northern islands, where fuel was scarce. That must have been difficult for Myuri, who had been born and raised in a bathhouse and took jumping into the hot baths every day for granted.

As he smiled, hearing the excited sounds of splashing, he noticed there was soap sitting beside the small tub meant for the foot bath. He had considered using the ash in the fireplace, so he was grateful for this.

“Myuri, there’s soap.”

“What, really?!”

She threw aside the curtain, and there she was, completely naked. Col typically turned his back to her at times like this, but he was tired, and she was being much too indifferent about the situation, so he could do nothing but

scold her.

“Myuri, you honestly need to be a bit more modest...”

“Hey, can you wash my hair for me?”

Not only that but she was not listening to a word he said. Instead, she asked for a favor while tugging on his sleeve.

“You can do that much by yourself.”

“But I have to wash my tail. If I have to wash it after I washed my hair, then the water’ll get cold.”

Col was exasperated with Myuri’s suspicious-sounding excuses when he saw how she grinned at him.

“I thought you would at least wash my hair as a reward for working hard in the northern islands.”

“...”

She had saved his life when they were in the north.

When she brought that up, he could not turn her down.

“I swear...”

“Eh-heh-heh!”

Myuri giggled, heading back toward the full tub to sit in it.

Col rolled up his sleeves, dipped the soap into the water, and began to wash Myuri’s hair once bubbles started to form.

Her once-smooth hair felt just like the coarse fur of a wolf, perhaps because of how long it had been tousled by the briny sea breeze. Now that he thought about it, it had been a long time since he last saw her use a comb. It may have been too painful.

The soap foamed as he gently scrubbed her hair, remembering his gratitude for what happened in the north, but Myuri was twisting her body in a strange way so she could reach her tail. When Col noticed, he tilted his head.

“Would this not be easier if I washed your tail and you took care of your

hair?”

After she felt around for her tail and pulled it toward her, she was diligently washing it, but she suddenly stopped and glanced over her shoulder back at him.

Then she quickly looked away.

“No. That’s embarrassing.”

Col thought Myuri had buried her sense of shame somewhere deep in the mountains, but that did not seem to be the case.

At the same time, he was not quite grasping her criteria for what qualified.

“May I touch your ears?”

The pointed wolf ears that Myuri had inherited from her mother lay flat on her head so that the bubbles would not get in.

“Sure. Just make sure water doesn’t get in them!”

“Of course.”

When he rinsed her hair off with buckets of water, he covered her ears with his hand to make sure the insides did not get wet. As he rinsed the suds off, her dull, ashen hair began to regain some of its luster. It was as if she had shed an old husk.

As Col cleaned the dirt and mud away, he somehow felt as though they had finally returned from the north.

He had witnessed a painful reality that made him question his identity. Events had forced him to be painfully aware of just how powerless and pitiful he was.

After falling into the dark, frigid sea, once he could no longer move and continued to sink, he had also experienced the final moments before what could have been his end. More importantly, he had seen with his own eyes the fear that gripped people when the possibility that their most treasured loved one might die.

And then came his miraculous salvation.

He recalled it all, realizing his heart had been overflowing with emotion over

the course of a scant few days.

“Myuri.”

“Hmm?”

He spoke her name, and the girl in question, who was vigorously rubbing the fur on her tail, looked back at him over her shoulder.

“Thank you...for everything you did in the north.”

While they were there, Col had truly hurt her. He wondered if he should apologize, but that was a bit different.

When he thanked her, she stared at him blankly before giggling.

“That’s okay, I’ll just have you repay me.”

Repay you? Col was about to ask, but she snatched the bucket from him and poured water over his head.

His clothes, which had finally dried out, were soaked again.

“So for now, you should come into the bath with me.”

“...”

Between his dripping bangs, Col could see Myuri grinning mischievously at him, her canines bared.

“I jumped in after you when you fell into the pitch-black, midwinter sea in the middle of the night. So it should be nothing for you to jump into some nice warm water for me, right?”

He wanted to say that those were completely different things, but when Myuri sat in front of him and said, “Right?” with a smile while wagging her tail, his words fell away before they could even take form. Not even a shadow of the resolute priest he wished to be could be seen.

“Come on, hurry up or the water will get cold!”

Happy that he showed no resistance, Myuri reached out and began to remove his clothes. A maiden’s bashfulness and modesty was nowhere to be found.

What was present could be considered overflowing goodwill, plus a complete

lack of intent to compromise.

“Okay, now sit there and behave.”

Col did as he was told and sat in the filled tub. Myuri washed his hair as she cackled, as though something was funny. He hated how comfortable he felt.

He hugged his knees, and with an irritated sigh, he wondered how *he* could be the Twilight Cardinal.

After Myuri washed Col’s hair, they argued about this and that, eventually managing to finish rinsing off the dirt from their long journey. After changing into fresh clothes that were not damp with seawater for a change, Col felt completely revitalized; as if he had been reborn. Before long, their hot meal was ready for them, and it was all much more than he could have hoped for.

He had imagined the food would be impressive, but there was so much of it, and the quality was even more awe-inspiring. The lamb that Myuri had been looking forward to was so tender that the meat nearly fell off the bone just from picking it up. The portions were so gratuitous that she only took one piece. Their withered bodies quickly regained all their moisture from the ample grease.

Pure white wheat bread. Butter the size of bricks. Pork sausage bursting at the seams. Chicken broth soup. There were even sweets; dried grapes and apples filled an entire basket.

Myuri was eager to get a mouthful of everything. But she had weathered a close brush with death in the northern islands. Even without that, she had come down with a fever, then ran around sniffing out mines in her wolf form after her recovery. Just today, she had gotten caught in a violent storm out at sea, followed by a good amount of playing around in the bath.

By the time she reached out for her third piece of bread, it was only natural she stopped moving, almost like a string somewhere had been cut. She had managed quite well up to this point, really. Her head was on its side as she was fast falling asleep, but her gluttony ensured that her hands continued to have a tight grip on the food. Col almost felt as though he should praise her for it.

But if her face fell into her soup bowl, their long-awaited bath would be

meaningless.

She resisted somewhat when he tried to gently pry the bread from her hands, but when he pulled her soap-scented head into a hug, she slumped right into him. With a sigh, Col lifted the princess from the chair; he was used to this, too.

He lay her down on the bed stuffed with wool, but she gripped his sleeve to make sure he would not leave.

“I’m not going anywhere. I need to let them know that they can put the rest of the food away. I’ll be right back.”

The freshly washed, soft hairs on her wolf ears swayed at his whisper.

He caressed her head, pulled up the covers since her ears and tail were still visible, then called someone to put away the food. He felt bad about how much of their meal remained untouched, but the maid, who had just finished placing the bread into a bag, shuffled over to him to ask a question.

“May I ask for a blessing for this bread?”

“A blessing? But...”

He bit back his surprise, but there was a pained expression on the maid’s face.

“It’s been several years since the priests left this town. Please have mercy, should you pity us.”

It had been three years since the kingdom confronted the Church and the pope banned all religious activities in the region, which meant any clerical acts normally performed by priests were no longer allowed. Children born could not be blessed, weddings were not held, and the souls of the deceased were not laid to rest in funerals.

Still, there were times when the people needed to cling to something just to carry on living. Some required support if a family member had fallen ill and was confined to bed, while others worried about the safety of a loved one who had left to work in a far-off land. Help was needed when there were troubles that could not be shared with anyone else or there was a big decision to be made.

No matter how Col thought about it, they were given such a large amount of food for a reason. Food that esteemed guests were offered but could not finish

was typically shared among the servants, but there was a holiness in food blessed by a priest. It was medicine for the sick, a talisman for the anxious. Sligh was being showy, but it was not to curry their favor.

Considering it his fee for staying, Col prayed that all the food be blessed by God. He prayed for the happiness and health of the maids, asking that their melancholy be quelled. He even prayed for a safe childbirth for one of the girls' relatives.

He could not bring himself to mention the finer details, such as how he was not an official priest. Rather, he honestly expected to earn suspicion of heresy for carrying out unlicensed religious activities.

Here, at this very moment, there were people seeking salvation. Col thought that if the least he could do was pretend, then he should. When he was finished, all the girls sincerely called him a "cardinal." Their tearful faces only strengthened his belief.

While he had learned in the northern islands that prayer alone solved nothing, he now thought that as long as there were those who yearned for it, prayer was something worth doing.

Once more, Col was strongly convinced that they could not haphazardly dissolve the Church.

Before the pope and the kingdom had begun their fight, even if they were vaguely aware of the various issues, it was without a doubt that the church in town had provided healing for the souls of the people.

After Col sent away the last maid, in his exhaustion, he felt confident that righting the Church was the correct path.

But first, he needed sleep. He let out a long-suppressed yawn. Faith could not do away with the fatigue of the body.

He quenched his parched throat with a bit of sweet wine, then blew out the candle. Col could tell the town of Desarev was a lively one at night, seeing how the light of the torches lining the main street filtered through the cracks in the window. Thanks to that light, he made it to the bed without bumping into anything.

He quietly slipped under the same blanket as Myuri, doing his best not to wake her. But she immediately gripped his chest and pulled her face in closer to him.

“...You...done?”

She mumbled as though she was talking in her sleep, and her eyes were still closed.

Her tone was not so much sweet and lovable—like it would have been if she had tried her best to stay up until her big brother could go to sleep—but rather, mildly annoyed that the prayer sessions had been much too loud.

Either way, it made him smile.

“Yes. Let’s get a good night’s sleep.”

“...Mm.”

Col could not tell if that mumble was her response or just her breathing.

The wrinkles between her eyebrows disappeared, and the tension in her hands melted away. He felt as though it was the first time in a while he had seen such a calm expression on her face.

Her childlike sleeping face was incredibly familiar.

“May there be happiness wherever you go.”

He prayed; of all the prayers he gave today, this was the one he poured the most feeling into.

Myuri’s wolf ears twitched slightly as she wriggled around a bit before finally slipping back into her slumber.

When Col closed his eyes, he fell asleep in an instant.

His encounters with the maids that night were merely a trial run for the next day. Col woke with the rising sun, heading to the well in the courtyard to wash his face. Once he opened the door, three maids were waiting for him with a washbasin. Of course, before he went to do so, he listened to their troubles and offered them God’s protection, as well as blessings.

Attendants came to prepare firewood, retrieve candle stubs, or ready

breakfast, and every time, they told Col of their troubles. By then, even the sleepyhead Myuri had to reluctantly open her eyes because she could not stand the noise.

As she watched all the people come and go, she finally understood that she would not be able to sleep in this morning, resulting in a grumpy mood.

After breakfast, four people—a merchant who dealt in fabric and his personal tailors—visited to adjust their clothing. Myuri would have typically pestered Col with *Brother, does this look good on me?* or *How about this one?* but the merchant and the tailors who brought the fabric, thread, and needles spoke before she could. Three of them had daughters who were in the middle of preparing for their weddings, and one had elderly parents who were unwell.

May God guide and protect them.

Fresh sheets and bedding were provided, so once the attendants began to clean the room, Myuri took a blanket along with a pillow and retreated to the next room.

In the end, there were not that many excuses to visit Col and Myuri's quarters. Col had naively thought that people would soon stop coming to the room without a proper reason, but a clever individual came to offer him a copy of the scripture. Before long, merchants and servants alike were bringing quills, knives to sharpen those quills, ink pots, sand to dry the ink, parchment, and every other sort of tool they could think of from the first-floor loading area. Of course, they also brought a number of matters for consultation.

Business was not going so well, discontent plagued the family, a son had gone off to sea, a baby was about to be born; then there were toothaches or back pain. The maids who had all grown up together even talked about how the roosters no longer crowed, the evil shapes of clouds in the west, and how a black cat had passed in front of them three times in a single day.

On top of everything, so many people visited and all individually brought up their problems, so much so that Col forgot what excuse they made to come to the room when they were really seeking intervention from God.

Every town had a church, and in that church were priests, their assistants, and in larger houses of worship, bishops sat with many clergymen working under

them. They were the ones who took responsibility for the troubles of all the townspeople. The harmful effects of their leaving were no trivial matter. Faith was never useless, and an organization to manage that faith was necessary.

There was much for Col to think about as a servant of God, but for Myuri, who had no interest in what was going on, it was upsetting that he was not paying attention to her. There was no doubt she was gnashing her teeth in anger in the next room.

While Col was happy he could be of use to all the people who came and went from the room, he was not used to it and soon felt strangely tired out. But he faced those who came to him with his entire body and soul. By the time he could barely understand his own words, the wave of people died down to a trickle. That was only because Sligh had come to their room.

“I’m sorry everyone in the company swarmed you like that.”

He wore an apologetic expression, but of course, Col did not think he discouraged anyone from coming.

“It’s all right...These quarters are big enough for it.”

Sligh probably gave them the biggest rooms because he knew this would happen.

The man grinned when he understood the meaning behind Col’s words, but then his demeanor suddenly became somber.

“It’s already been three years since the church bell stopped ringing. The priests did stay in town for a while, but the majority of them crossed the sea and went to the mainland. We not only have the church on the cape but also three other large chapels. Every single one has been boarded up. The chapels in association and company buildings, too, have long sat empty.”

Col had heard stories about what was going on in the kingdom back in Nyohhira. But listening to someone talk about it was completely different from experiencing it firsthand. It was very much like how most did not fully realize how terrible sickness could be when they were still healthy.

Still, he had some questions.

“What became of the clergy who remained? I can’t imagine all of them left for the mainland, right?”

Sligh’s shoulders heaved.

“There might be spies sent by the pope wandering around. See what happens when you ignore the pope’s orders and pray for the people. I don’t think anyone would be reinstated if it involves something where the pope’s interests might come out on top. The upper echelons of society are holding their collective breaths, but those at the bottom can’t afford to live without priesthood.”

“What about the people’s donations?”

Immediately after asking, Col realized he already knew the answer. It wasn’t possible to have an argument alone. Sligh nodded.

“Townpeople who donate to the clergy are seen as traitors of the kingdom as well as agents of the Church. Individually, there are people who are fine with whoever will help them, whether it’s someone from the Church or not, as long as they can get mediation from God. But loyal citizens have been abstaining.”

The blessings of faith had disappeared from the town.

“Sir Col, what you started in Atiph was truly the good news we, the people of this kingdom, have been waiting so long for. This endless standoff between the kingdom and the Church is finally moving on to the next step. Everyone was waiting for something to happen, no matter how the cards fell. Of course...”

Sligh continued.

“I want the kingdom to win, since we, too, recoiled from the tyranny of the Church.”

No matter the outcome, war was always most devastating for the innocent.

“I would be happy to help if I can be of service. That is exactly why I left my home village.”

Col was a foreigner in this land. Moreover, he could not really be called a true priest. And yet people believed he was in God’s favor.

It seemed he was in a very good position.

“Thank you so very much. I give my thanks to God, who must have sent you here.”

Then, by Sligh’s signal, they were brought lunch. Myuri appeared from the other room, drawn in by the smell. At first, she seemed rather grumpy, but her mood instantly improved upon seeing the food laid out on the table. Col could only sigh at her selfishness.

“By the way, I heard from Mr. Yosef that you are brother and sister, traveling together?”

Myuri, who held bread in her right hand and pork sausage stuck on a knife in her left, glanced at Sligh, then to Col. Then she lost interest and bit into the bread, as though meaning to say it was Col’s job to take care of his question.

As he thought about how he was going to give her a thorough scolding afterward, he responded.

“We are not related by blood. Before I left on my travels I worked at an inn, and she is the innkeeper’s daughter. I worked as her caretaker and tutor, but she is just as unruly as you can see...She constantly spoke of her desire to leave the village and snuck into my luggage the moment the opportunity presented itself.”

Myuri continued to eat her food silently, but she stomped on Col’s foot under the table.

“However, she has taught me many things since we started traveling together, and for that I am thankful.”

She froze for a moment and turned his way. Col returned her gaze with a smile, and she quickly looked away with a pout. Still, she kept her foot firmly planted on his.

“A relationship where you can gain so much from each other is a wonderful thing.”

Sligh spoke happily and wiped his mouth.

“By the way, I wanted to talk about what happens next. As the master of this trading house, I have an obligation to mind the peace of the souls of those who

work here, but at the same time, I must think about the guests who stay with us.”

As Col wondered what he was suddenly on about, Sligh continued.

“If you stay in this room, people will come to see you at all hours, so if you wish to go outside and clear your head, please just say the word. Going out dressed like a priest may get you wrapped up in some trouble, so we will prepare some artisan clothes for you.”

“Truly, thank you for everything you’ve done.”

“It is my pleasure. Thanks to you, everyone in the trading house seems at ease. It might even be possible that such high spirits will afford us a competitive edge on rival companies.”

Col could not tell how serious Sligh was being, but he could tell that their host was keeping his best interests in consideration.

“As long as you say so.”

“So what will it be? The moment we finish our meal and I leave this room, company workers will come flooding in again.”

“Erm...”

As he hesitated, Myuri, who sat next to him, impatiently tugged on his sleeve. She wanted to go out to town.

“My apologies. I have business to attend to with Mr. Yosef, so do you think we might be able to borrow clothes to venture out in?”

“Of course. Please wait a moment.”

Sligh clapped his hands, summoning the servants that were quietly waiting just outside the room.

They nodded solemnly upon hearing his orders, and then Myuri interjected, stating she wanted to see her own clothes. Sligh seemed rather happy to hear such a selfish request from her.

Col found himself irritated by that, but he knew she had endured quite a lot in the northern islands, where the only sounds were that of waves thundering

against the ground and the cheerless wind. After a moment of reflection, he decided there was not much he could do about her requests.

As he watched her enjoy herself so much that her hidden ears and tail threatened to pop out, he wished she would just go out and see the town on her own, but she suddenly looked at him.

“Is something the matter?”

Her reddish-amber eyes, staring intently at him, were filled with an intellectual depth she inherited from her mother.

“You were just thinking about wanting me to go to town alone, weren’t you?”

Though he had yet to understand God’s true intentions, Myuri saw straight through him.

“Sure, but I won’t let that happen, now will I?”

And he, too, knew her very well.

“Right!”

She grinned and she gripped his hand, intertwining her fingers with his.

Though he sometimes felt she was too overpowering, he was always happy with how she looked up to him.

“Because I don’t know what I’d do if I wanted to buy something and you weren’t there!”

That was what he had figured. When he smiled and sighed, Myuri giggled.

No one can tell who a person is on the inside with only a glance. Even within the scripture, when God and spirits disguised themselves as humans, no one noticed. Saints were always ridiculed by others.

In the end, a person’s identity was determined by the clothes they wore.

Though that should have been the general theory, something about it did not sit well with Col.

“It doesn’t matter what you wear, Brother. None of it ever really fits you.”

She could no longer tease him, and there was a genuinely puzzled expression

on her face.

“...Meanwhile, you look like an outstanding errand boy from a workshop.”

Myuri wore a tight-sleeved shirt with pants made of rough wool for their sturdiness and a tool belt wound around her waist. After tying her hair back, Myuri had suddenly transformed into the very image of a long-haired young apprentice.

Col wore similar clothing, but even the merchant who prepared the clothes for them only managed to give him a vague smile.

“Why don’t you dress like a merchant? I would be convinced if someone told me you were a young master from town.”

In the end, that didn’t seem very realistic to Col, who thought that pen and ink suited him best.

After that exchange, they went out into town. Myuri did not actually go straight for every food stall to ask for morsels. Maybe it was because they had just eaten lunch, but for once, her curiosity won out over her appetite.

Her eyes sparkled as they passed through the artisans’ district.

“Brother!! Look! It’s a huge pot! We could eat so much food from that!”

“That pot is actually a distilling pot, and it’s for alcohol made from wheat...”

“Hey, Brother, look at that over there; they’re selling some weird-looking spears!”

“Those aren’t spears. They use them to skewer pigs and sheep before placing them in an oven. The handle is shaped like a hook so you can hold that and spin it around to cook the meat...”

“Wow, cool! Is this a furs shop? But wouldn’t wearing fur this thin be cold in the winter?”

“We saw this in Atiph, remember? That’s not for wearing. It’s for writing on, and they pull it like that from all sides as they dry it...”

“Hey, hey, Brother, look at that!”

Myuri continued to not pay attention to his explanations as they traveled

from one stall to the next. Still, he was impressed that whenever she saw something he had explained once before, she remembered everything he had said. At a glance, she seemed like a carefree girl running about, but she was absorbing everything in the world with an incredible vitality.

As they wandered from place to place, the road led from the artisans' district to the residential area, but Myuri suddenly fell silent. She stood still, staring off into space.

Then, almost entirely unconsciously, she gripped Col's arm.

Whenever her scales of curiosity dipped too far in one direction, she grew quiet.

She was watching women and children sitting under the eaves of the houses in Desarev, spinning thread from wool.

The majority of the work in the artisans' district took place in workshops, but here, tools were spread throughout the street. Through open front windows and doors, people could be seen working inside as well. It was hard to tell how far the houses and the workspace stretched. They could see some people placing things on a board wrapped in string to lower them down to street level before hoisting it back up again. Someone even used a large spatula meant for bread ovens to give and receive materials across the space between neighboring houses—something about it all seemed unreal.

It looked like a play he once saw in a southern country that used the entire town as the stage.

“Whoa...”

Myuri murmured unconsciously as she watched.

There was a large sheet placed in the center of the street, where an entire mountain of wool had been heaped on it. Little girls were burying their faces into the pile, pulling out rubbish. Behind them, some slightly older girls ran over the wool with some sort of rake to tidy the direction of the fur.

Things that appeared to be drying racks were lined up against the houses, where the girls stretched to hang the wool up. They tied weights to the bundles of wool that were sequentially placed in the higher areas, which must have

been a part of the twisting process. Since height was necessary, girls a bit older than Myuri chatted noisily as they worked.

There was almost no place for Col and Myuri to walk as they passed through the busy area, until they eventually reached one of the waterways that wrapped around the town. Men they had not seen earlier were gathered there, lifting up a mallet using a rope attached to a pulley to hammer wool that was placed in the water. This was the milling part of the journey.

Beside the men were barrels stuffed full of wool. Workers sprinkled water, ash, and some sort of medicine into the barrels, mixing everything, then washing it with a pole. Once finished, the wool, now heavy with water, was given to children for them to stomp the moisture out. Afterward, other children laid out the fabric to dry.

There were even young men, carrying linen sacks bigger than themselves to transport materials between each stage of the process.

“It’s like an ant colony.”

Myuri spoke with a sigh in pure admiration. Col thought her observation was spot-on.

“The very symbol of diligence.”

“...Don’t start lecturing me.”

She dramatically held her hands over her ears, as though telling him to leave her alone.

“I won’t. You worked very hard in the north.”

Myuri continued to cast a doubtful expression at him, but when she realized that he was being serious, she suddenly burst into a smile and clung to his arm.

“But everyone really is working with their all. They even seem to be having fun while doing it.”

Col murmured thoughtfully while taking in the buzzing activity.

“Isn’t Nyohhira as exciting as this?”

Then Myuri said something unexpected. It had been a while since they left

Nyohhira, so perhaps she was growing homesick.

“It may be about the same with regards to excitement, but Nyohhira is nothing but feasts.”

On the other hand, this place was exciting due to the working people. Not only that, but all over the town, whether under the eaves or in the crowded alleyways, people labored to create wool. And every person truly seemed to take joy in their work.

Col did not hate working, either, but he found it mysterious how the atmosphere surrounding the townspeople made him think it was a bit different.

As they walked around, watching it all, Myuri suddenly spoke.

“Oh, right, didn’t you say you had something to do, Brother?”

“That’s right. We have to go see Mr. Yosef...”

He said, and looked at Myuri.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

When she stared back blankly at him, he couldn’t help the smile spreading across his face.

“I am happy you were thinking about what I had to do and not demanding more leisure time.”

She blinked, then responded with an odd expression.

“I mean, if you don’t finish your errand, then you’ll get angry if I ask for food and tell me to wait until you’re done. And I’m gonna be hungry soon.”

“...”

Col worried about whether it was safe to consider that proper growth.

However, it was true that he had matters to attend to, so they changed course for the Desarev harbor. The town itself was lively, but the port was many times busier. He soon learned that there were comparatively fewer people out yesterday because of the passing rain. Col gripped Myuri’s hand as they were jostled around until they finally managed to reach the ship at their destination.

The crew must have been reloading the ship with cargo or something of the

sort because it was incredibly busy, with people constantly coming and going like ants. Col hesitated since asking someone to call Yosef would bring attention to himself, but the man in question just happened to be leaning over the edge of the ship. He had been staring intently down at something on the side of the ship, but when he suddenly lifted his head, he noticed the two of them.

“Sir Col!”

Yosef stood straight and called his name. After giving orders to the man next to him, he quickly crossed the ramp to approach them.

“What is it? Is something wrong at the trading house?”

Yosef asked with a serious expression, likely because since he had brought them there, any discomfort they encountered was his responsibility. He was a man with a strong sense of duty.

“Of course not. They are treating us very well.” First order of business for Col was to give the captain peace of mind before tackling the main issue. “I wanted to ask when we might be setting sail for Rausbourne.”

If their departure was delayed, then he wanted to arrange for a different ship. He even considered going on land by horse, though he felt that would be rude to Yosef.

“I see. Well, earliest we can depart is in three days, but if we find any problems, emergency repairs might take somewhere from a week to ten days.”

Yosef looked back at the ship behind him, speaking apologetically. Myuri, too, looked down toward the bottom of the vessel, where someone was hanging from the edge, apparently inspecting its condition.

“Other ships might not be leaving for a while, either. The storm left behind strong winds offshore, and I’ve heard the currents are quite strong. I also can’t recommend going by horse. It may look like it’s just a short jaunt over the mountain on the map, but at this time of year, there’s still snow on the ground. Sea routes are much, much quicker.”

It nettled Col slightly, but there was nothing he could do about it.

“Desarev is a good town. Take the time to rest as much as you can, and it will

help prepare you for the next task.”

Pressuring Yosef would lead nowhere, and Hyland had not asked them to make haste in her letter.

“Of course. Perhaps this, too, is the will of God.”

Yosef smiled, rather relieved. Then he spoke up again.

“Oh, that’s right. Someone came looking for you earlier, Sir Col.”

“What?”

There were several people he had met when he worked at the bathhouse in Nyohhira who were in the kingdom, but he did not think that any of them knew he was in Desarev. When he responded in surprise, Yosef shrugged.

“They did not mention your name. They only asked if the priest who took part in the events up north was on this ship, so it may have been someone who quickly caught wind of you. Our guests and sailors keep their mouths shut, after all.”

Sligh had mentioned such a thing, but Col had not imagined that it would actually happen.

“It didn’t seem like you knew them so I avoided the question, but I’m glad you showed up in those clothes. If people around here find out who you are, there might have been some trouble.”

He looked down at his own clothes, and Myuri, standing beside him, stared straight at him.

At least he did not look like a priest.

“There is power in fame, and there are many who try to use that power.”

“Thank you for the warning.”

“Oh, of course.”

There were still many things Col did not know about the world, and he thought it would be best to take Yosef’s advice to heart.

That being said, the thought of someone of using him did not sound like something that would happen in real life. How could he be used in the first

place? He would be glad to interpret theological works for anyone. They only had to ask.

“Anyway, I’ll be dropping by the trading house tonight, so why don’t we have a drink together with Sir Sligh? My favorite distillery is in this town, you know.”

As Yosef spoke, men stood lined up behind him, waiting for his attention.

Col felt bad for interrupting his work.

“Yes, I look forward to it.”

Col gave his reply and left with Myuri.

When they traveled through the harbor at the beginning of their visit, simply walking forward had been difficult. Now that he understood the flow of people, it was not much trouble.

Myuri was looking around restlessly, so Col had to ask.

“Have you spotted anything odd?”

Then, after a brief look of surprise, she raised her eyebrows slightly.

“I’m just making sure there aren’t any bad guys coming after you.”

It was his job as the adult male to protect the young girl. Despite that, he could not find anything to say back to the irritated Myuri.

“It’s dangerous out there, so don’t get separated from me. Okay, Brother?”

At times like these, Col did not know who was leading whom.

But he no longer found himself exasperated, nor did he call her cheeky anymore.

“I’m counting on you.”

A smile suddenly burst across Myuri’s face, with all her teeth showing.

“Leave it to me!”

She was in such high spirits that it seemed her ears and tail would pop out at any moment, but she suddenly stopped in the middle of the crowded harbor, staring straight up.

Col followed the girl’s gaze up to the sky, wondering if an angel had somehow

fallen from the heavens.

“Hey, Brother, I wanna go there!”

She extended her arm and pointed to the large cathedral on the cape, housing a fire that lit the way for ships lost at sea, as well as a flame for the faith of the people.

CHAPTER TWO



CHAPTER TWO

On the road from the harbor to the cathedral on the point, Myuri's spirits grew higher and higher.

"Hurry up, Brother, hurry!"

The girl, a stranger to fatigue, flew up the stone steps on the hill. The steps had been placed on soft grass and seemed as if they were sinking into the ground, perhaps because they had been used for hundreds of years. There was an indent on all of them, a reminder that many people had walked up these steps with great enthusiasm.

However, at the moment they could not see a single soul walking up these steps, and the beggars loitering around the foot of the cape told them that the townspeople did not make the climb anymore, not since the kingdom started fighting with the Church. In the past, the beggars made good money appealing to the faith of believers as they passed by.

Col did not know how they were making ends meet now, but they all sat around a pot and were drinking soup filled with a little leftover fish, so it seemed they were not worried about their meals.

He gave them a little copper, then chased after Myuri who had rushed ahead.

Of course, she was not rushing because she had suddenly discovered a pious heart.

Even halfway up the hill, he could see both the entirety of Desarev and the wide-open sea after turning around.

There was no doubt it was too much to resist for the mountain-raised Myuri.

"Be sure not to fall from the cliff!"

He called out to her, but of course, she would not heed his warning. She ran up the stone steps so close to the edge of the cliff that he broke out into a

sweat, then looked down at the town below.

Right around the time he started to curse his lack of physical strength, they finally arrived at the cathedral at the apex of the cape.

There were a few wooden buildings standing before the magnificent cathedral, almost as if a little town that had sprouted around a castle's gates. There were outdoor stoves and stone groundwork for where tables and chairs once sat; visitors could have had a bite to eat or a rest after a visit to the cathedral.

But there were no traces of the stove being lit recently, nor did he spot any tables or chairs, and shutters covered the entrances to all the buildings.

The world around the cathedral was dreadfully quiet and devoid of life.

“Broootheer! Look at this view!!”

On the other hand, Myuri, who wasn't the least bit interested in the Cathedral, was incredibly excited about the panorama she could see from the top. While she had shown more interest toward the cathedral back in Atiph, it was likely that she saw both simply as large stone structures.

He could not help but smile at her broad generalization and decisiveness.

That being said, he did not think the townspeople were all like Myuri, and the cathedral was deserted for exactly the reasons Sligh mentioned. The path to the top could be seen from every part of town, so anyone making the climb would immediately become the subject of gossip.

Col and Myuri were outsiders, so he did not think it would be a problem, and since the fire in the lighthouse never went out, someone had to be regularly coming and going to tend it. Wondering if they might be able to learn something about this region, he walked over to the closed doors, where he saw — “Notices?”

There were numerous bills plastered all over the cathedral doors. It was cheap paper made not from parchment but from old rags. They were plastered on with such density they looked like designs from far away.

Large cathedrals and churches had various distinctive features depending on

the area they were in. Wondering if there was some sort of history behind the bills, he took a closer look, and a chill ran down his spine.

SWINDLERS! GO TO HELL!

Beside it, there were other papers that said, PLEASE RETURN MY ASSETS and REPENT! Letters filled with criticism and anger covered the doors. They rustled solemnly in the wind, carrying an atmosphere that was the complete opposite of the lively town center.

Sligh had sounded as though he resented the Church's tyranny, so these papers must have been plastered here when the relationship between the kingdom and the Church grew intense. And if he looked closely, Col saw that they had all faded and seemed as if they were about to crumble away.

He did also consider that perhaps the people posted them here not out of anger but duty as a member of the town.

The cathedral doors were closed shut, with no signs of people.

Visitors did not seem welcome with a sight like this anyhow.

He gave up and returned to Myuri's side, who was gazing out over the scenery.

"Look, Brother! The world is so big!"

Myuri noticed him and spoke before a wide-open ocean. Deep in the mountains of Nyohhira, the views from the summit of any peak only went so far.

But before them, there was a vast, never-ending sea.

He faced west, the complete opposite side of the mainland. As they were returning from the north on Yosef's ship, Col recalled that Yosef had yelled out not to drift west.

Beyond the horizon, where the sky and sea melded together, was an endless ocean.

An unfamiliar sense of dread crept into him when he let his thoughts linger on that. Or perhaps, he felt as if he had caught a glimpse of the abyss that belonged only to the God that created this world.

As he stared out over the water, a sudden gust of wind blew from below.

Being small and light, Myuri almost fell over, and Col rushed to hold her in place.

“Are you all right?”

“Ah-ha-ha! It’s so windy! It’s nice how the wind touches the ocean!”

She likely had not even considered what would happen if she was blown off the side of the cliff. Myuri cackled in excitement, then slipped out of his arms.

Then, as though she finally noticed that there was a building here at the apex of the cape, she stared up blankly.

“Hey, Brother, is that a church, too?”

“...”

It would be quite the struggle to awaken her faith.

“Yes. It’s a cathedral. I’ve heard there’s a lighthouse at the top; can you see it?”

“Where they always keep a fire going, right? I heard a lot about legends of the lighthouse from that old man Yosef.”

Yosef was from the northern islands and a merchant of the seas. He also enjoyed stories and apparently told Myuri many adventurous tales from these waters.

“I can’t believe they built that in a place like this.”

“It is a product of faith.”

Myuri bared her teeth in a grimace when he said that. She then spun around to take in the sights.

“But I really like how a place like this exists.”

There was a bit of a dour mood to the place, but the current weather was enjoyable and refreshing.

The atmosphere was very fitting for the energetic Myuri.

As Col thought about all that, his right hand suddenly grew warm.

When he looked down, he saw she was holding it.

“I’d like to get married in a place like this. What do you think, Brother?”

She wore a big smile on her face. He looked at her—she was being surprisingly feminine—then up at the cathedral, out to sea, and finally back at her.

“I do think it’s a nice place.”

“Sheesh, stop pretending like it’s not your business!”

He found himself at a loss as she grew offended when he finally realized what she meant.

Thinking it impossible, he tried to change the subject, but he was too late.

“You’re the one I love, Brother. Who else would I get married to?”

She did not sound suspicious. She wasn’t trying to trick him or feign ignorance. This was a cathedral on the top of a cape, surrounded by sheer cliffs. Maybe she had only seemed to be running about innocently but had actually come here with this intention in the first place.

Col knew that idea was not so far-fetched when he saw her calm, questioning eyes.

“Don’t you think we sort of sealed the deal with everything that was going on in the northern islands, Brother?”

She spoke clearly with a razor focus.

“No, that was not...”

He could not bear to meet her steady gaze, sharply aware of his debt to her.

Myuri loved him not as her older brother but as a man.

At first, he thought it was simply because he was the closest male, but she had followed her heart and literally threw herself in danger’s way for him. Myuri was serious.

But he had not given her a definite answer. While he kept saying he could not reciprocate her affection, he did not try to force their journey to an end. Myuri was a smart girl; if he had truly rejected her and tried to put an end to their

travels, she would have backed off.

He could not do that because he had some reservations.

“Or is it that you hate me?”

She suddenly looked up at him with sad eyes, and his head began to hurt. Even if she was actually sad, he could tell right away that she had worked out how guilty he would feel once he saw her expression.

Little by little, she was destroying the obstacles that stood in her way, forcing him into a corner.

Myuri’s mother, Holo the Wisewolf, had personally taught her how to hunt.

“Brother?”

He had no choice but to answer her unrelenting questions.

“...If I had to choose, I would say I like you.”

“Then make me your bride.”

There was no negotiation, nothing. She pulled him in with all her strength and bit into him.

He was impressed, in a way, by her brazenness, but his answer would always be the same.

“I cannot...”

“Why?!”

When he took a step back, she advanced a step toward him.

It seemed she had not brought up the subject since they left the north simply because she was looking for the right opportunity.

“What do you mean, why? We are—”

“Not related by blood.”

She spoke decisively.

“And you’re not a priest yet, either. So that’s not a problem.”

She had already anticipated his excuses.

“But I may be one...soon...”

“I heard we can just get divorced when that happens.”

He wanted to scream—*Who put these unnecessary ideas in her head?!*

Myuri did not look away even for a moment. Silence descended, and the wind howled.

Then a sadness that she could no longer hold back began to reveal itself from beneath her angry expression. Col spoke up, flustered.

“Wait. Don’t jump to such conclusions—”

“But if I don’t, you’ll just end up dragging your feet forever!”

He wanted to say that was not true, but he was aware that he lacked resolve. More importantly, he had learned since leaving Nyohhira that it was impossible to know when something might happen. Recalling how he felt when he fell into the cold darkness of the sea and coming to the conclusion that he would die, he shivered.

He did not want to die while the matter with Myuri remained undecided.

But even disregarding that, he could not help but ask— “You don’t want to stay the way as we are now?”

She looked up to him as her big brother, and he channeled all his love into her while thinking of her as his little sister.

That arrangement had gone well thus far, and he felt it would be fine in the future as well.

“Let me just say this, but supposing on the off chance that we do get married, I will not listen to every whim or demand you have, you know? To say nothing of becoming a husband and wife that—”

“I know! Brother, you dummy!”

She grew angry, but Col found it hard to believe her words.

But did she really understand? Things would be completely different if their relationship became a romantic one. There lay the reason why he could not entirely accept Myuri’s feelings.

Regardless of how cute he thought she was, he found it incredibly immoral to take a little girl he knew since birth, who idolized and respected him, and look at her *that* way. He was racked with guilt from simply imagining it, but even though she had probably noticed his anguish, Myuri still spoke confidently.

“As long as it’s Brother, I can deal with anything that happens!”

It was Col who flushed when he heard her masculine and confident declaration.

But Col could just not see her behavior as something that was born of a man and a woman whose mutual love eventually blossomed. No matter how he thought about it, he believed that she did not mind having him because he had been by her side ever since she was born. In fact, she acted just like she used to when she was little. He realized that he never noticed how she felt because the way she acted never changed.

Indeed—Myuri was the same as she was when she was his little sister.

His little sister was asking him to see her as a woman, leaving Col at a loss.

“What is it you don’t like about me, Brother?”

There was no ruse or negotiation; she asked because she truly wanted to know.

It was not that he did not like her. If there were a man to take her as his wife, he would be the happiest man in the world.

So it was not about whether he liked her or not, but something else entirely.

“It is not what I don’t like about you...I cannot suddenly change how I look at you. Apples are apples, not grapes.”

“But, Brother, I really—”

It was that moment she began to argue back.

“I know.”

He cut her off early. He knew at this rate it would never be cleared up. But trying to resolve this problem now was most definitely not a good thing.

“I owe you so much for what you did in the northern islands. It is not

something I can easily repay, but I want to do everything I can for you.”

She made an uncomfortable and grouchy face before responding.

“...But I don’t want you to like me...for a reason like that...”

Needless to say, he also did not want to love someone only for the benefits they offered. To do that would be rude to Myuri.

What he wanted to say was different.

“Of course not. But I would like to earn your cooperation for all my efforts.”

“Cooperation?”

She asked back, puzzled.

“Yes. Right now, I...Erm, you are so much my little sister to me that I don’t think I could change the way I see you. So...”

“So I should stop being your little sister?”

Myuri asked curiously. She looked at him doubtfully, wondering if it was another one of his foxy tricks.

“But then...what should I do? Act more ladylike?”

He did want that but not for that reason.

“This is more, ah, in general. Think about it this way. It’s like how you address me.”

“Address?”

“Even if we were to be involved romantically, it would be strange for you to continue calling me ‘Brother,’ wouldn’t it?”

“Huh? Oh yeah...umm, hmm...”

“But I cannot imagine what you might call me instead. That is because I have never heard you call me anything *besides* Brother. So I cannot imagine myself as anything but your older brother.”

It was the same as when he had suddenly been called a cardinal by the townspeople and how uncomfortable that made him feel. A person’s title was like the clothes they wore, representing their place and status.

That was exactly how it was for Col. It was similar to how his clothes never seemed to suit him regardless of what outfit he wore. He felt as if he could be nothing more than brother when he stood next to her.

Myuri nodded, as though there was some truth to it, but when she looked up, she seemed cheerful.

“If that’s all, then it’s easy.”

When he imagined Myuri calling him by his name, however, it felt completely unnatural. Would she just call him Tote, by his first name with no honorific at all? It was much too ladylike for her to call him Mr. Tote, and it did not suit her. Master Tote was much too elegant, like the daughter of nobility. Or perhaps she would call him Col, like her mother and father did.

He was fairly certain there was no chance she would call him Little Col, but Mr. Col sounded like the merchants or other guests who came and went from the bathhouse, which felt too distant considering how long they had known each other. Her calling him Sir Col made it seem like they were a knight and his lady from some storybook.

No matter what he thought of, all the possibilities felt odd.

What would Myuri end up calling him?

He was so clueless that it almost made him curious. However, no matter how much time passed, she did not speak up.

“...Is something the matter?”

He posed the question to Myuri, whose face had not changed from the moment she had said, “That’s easy.” Suddenly, she looked up in surprise.

“What? Huh? Umm, something else to call you by that’s not...that’s not Brother, right?”

She wore a smile that tried to gloss over it but immediately stiffened up. Unusually, her eyes swam.

“Oohhh...Eh? But...but this should be easy...”

She must have been cycling through all the things she could call him, but perhaps none of them sat well with her.

“...Do you understand what I mean now?”

“Wait! Just wait!”

She closed her eyes. Her lips were moving silently, and he could tell she was thinking as hard as she could.

Watching her, he somehow felt relieved, but also a bit of a spiteful satisfaction. It was not so easy a thing, changing one’s perspective.

“Ooohhh...But it should...Co—...T...!”

What she was trying to do was call him by his name, but it was not going well. She gripped her head, hiding her red face with both arms, and squirmed.

In the end, she gave him a bitter glare from between her arms, then jumped toward him.

“Ooohh! Brother!!”

Myuri clung to him, pressed her face against his chest, and yelled with all her might. It felt as though it shot straight through his heart. Her ears and tail, which had appeared in all the excitement, were wriggling about with snakelike vigor.

He wrapped his arms around her with a slight smile and a sigh until she put her hands to his chest to push herself away.

“Y-you’re not gonna trick me with this!”

Col could almost see steam rising from the corners of her eyes, but she seemed to realize that her statement was rather silly. Her words lacked strength. He remembered once when he was young—before he was wise enough to be able to corner people with words—that he also threw tantrums such as this.

Myuri must have found his composure disagreeable, seeing how she bit her bottom lip and groaned.

Then she lowered her stance and rushed at him with all her strength.

THUD!

“?!”

Col involuntarily held his breath. Assuming that what he heard was the sound of Myuri head-butting him, he placed a hand on his chest to check.



But no, she was sitting before him, stone-still.

She was staring at something behind him.

Right when he turned around, wondering what was there, a shout came.

“You demon!”

The moment he heard that word, his body moved to shield Myuri before his mind understood what was going on. He immediately looked around for a place to hide. When he spotted a simple gazebo, he heard the yelling again.

“Stop talking!”

He could hear it coming from the other side of the cathedral doors.

He wondered what the commotion might be about, but then the doors swung open, and he heard the thunderous voice again.

“You can’t dupe me with those fake papers! Leave, you godless miser!”

Then a person flew out from the doors, as though they were pushed out by the voice. She landed dramatically on her behind and toppled over backward, as though she had been forcefully ejected.

“God will judge you!”

As Col and Myuri stood dumbstruck, they could see the terrifying form of a priest from between the gaps in the door who, judging by his clothes, worked at this cathedral. Due to how dark it was inside, he practically looked like a demon himself. The priest, driven by anger, was about to say something else, but he suddenly noticed Col and Myuri.

He held his tongue, growing calm upon seeing the presence of a third party. Frowning, he pulled the doors with all his might.

The person on the ground sat up, moving to lean on the doors. She held parchment or something of the sort in her hand.

“W-wait! These aren’t fake—”

Not waiting for her to finish, the doors closed. They could hear the heavy *ka-thunk* of the crossbar lowering across the door. There was no clearer signal of rejection.

Col suddenly came to his senses, having been struck silent by all the commotion.

The person before the doors, hanging her head, did not seem to be a believer from town. He could tell by her easily recognizable traveling clothes and the conversation about papers that she must have come to take back something once loaned to the church, or something like that.

Myuri had fallen silent. Col pulled the hood over her head and tapped her tail before turning around.

“Are you all right?”

Col’s question made the person sitting slumped before the doors jump in surprise. Much like how they had not noticed what was going on inside the cathedral, this person likely had not realized there were people outside, either.

She hurriedly put the piece of parchment away in her breast pocket and turned around, and this time, it was Col’s turn to be surprised.

The face under the hood was that of a young girl.

“Ah, um, ah—”

Her eyes immediately met with his, and she grabbed her crooked hood which was slipping off her head with both hands in an attempt to cover her face, perhaps because they had seen her in such an embarrassing moment. For someone to see a regular town girl be thrown out of the cathedral and cursed as a demon by a priest would not only disqualify her from getting married but would actually make it difficult for her to keep living in the town at all.

Though it hardly seemed that there would be anything else that could cause her shame, Col of course knew something was going on.

He held out his hand to calm her down.

“Can you stand?”

The girl’s face was still frozen stiff, but after she looked between him and his hand, she seemed to conclude that he was not an enemy. She inhaled a shaky breath before timidly reaching out.

For her to willingly accept another person’s goodwill after being so frightened

was proof of her sincere personality. Col smiled to reassure her, and he thought he noticed her expression relaxed a bit.

But it was then that her shaking hand, perhaps from the fright of being pushed so forcefully, reached out to take his.

“ ... ”

The girl’s eyes widened, and for the first time in his life, he witnessed the moment a person’s pupils shrunk.

She was not looking at him, however, but farther behind him.

He turned around, following her gaze, and there was only one other person there.

For an instant, he thought she spotted Myuri’s ears and tail, but she had already concealed them. More importantly, Myuri was also staring wide-eyed.

“Could you...be...?”

When she murmured that, there was a tug on Col’s hand and he stumbled.

“What, but, huh—”

A sound of rustling interrupted him. When he looked at the girl, she had already fainted. It was so sudden that he had no idea what was happening.

As he stood, baffled, a sudden strong gust blew from the cape below. Their clothes and hair flapped in the wind. The girl’s hood had slipped off when she collapsed, freeing her hair to dance about in the draft as well.

“Wha—?”

If that were all, then none of this would have been a big deal. Her particularly wavy, black hair might make those from superstitious areas suspect her of being a witch, which could have made her unwelcome in places such as that, but that was not the issue.

There was clearly something rigid laying against her soft hair as it flitted in the wind.

“Myuri...could she be...?”

The girl collapsed before them had spiraled sheep horns on her head.

Not only had the girl just quarreled with the priest but she also had horns. It was clear they could not rely on help from the cathedral.

Col considered waiting until she woke up, but the wind at the top of the cape was cold. The situation would only get messier if the priest came outside to check on things and ran into them.

In the end, he wound up carrying her on his back for the trip back to town.

Myuri watched over the sheep girl anxiously but kept her distance from Col.

She was dragging her feet, likely because she still could not call him anything but Brother, despite how much she wanted him to see her as a woman.

And yet, he was relieved to learn that she still considered their relationship within the bounds of brother and sister, much like himself. Though he did not think that was enough to make her give up, Col did not mind. If she wanted to go about changing things little by little, then he would surely accommodate that.

He could not know how things would turn out until they happened.

At the very least, how dearly he held Myuri would not change. Filled with those feelings, he looked at her. When she noticed his gaze, she turned away in a huff.

He smiled adoringly, then adjusted the girl on his back. Myuri was worried about her, too, as whenever she peeked at the girl's twisting expression, she seemed uneasy.

He managed to carry her with relative ease on the downward slope, though his knees were laughing at him by the time they made it all the way down, and the beggars sitting around at the bottom looked at him oddly.

It was unlikely that his legs would be able to hold out for the whole journey to the Debau trading house, so they set forth for Yosef's ship instead.

When they managed to reach the pier the ship was docked at, there was a fire roaring inside a big pot. Black liquid boiled in a smaller pot inside it. Perhaps it was to keep the pier from burning. Telling by smell and color, Col knew it was the oil that came out when roasting coal. When rubbed on wood, it was

waterproof and rotproof, so they often used it for building repairs in Nyohhira. When Myuri left Nyohhira, she had hidden in a barrel meant for transporting the substance, and he remembered how her typical sweet scent was replaced with a burnt odor for a little while.

Yosef was dipping a bundle of hemp string into the pot.

“Oh, Sir Col, what’s happened?”

As he asked, he looked at the person on Col’s back and blinked.

“I’m sorry, we need to look after this person, so I wondered if we might borrow your ship.”

“I don’t mind. Hey! Somebody!”

Yosef immediately called over a burly sailor, who took the girl from Col. Col had been just a few steps away from collapsing, but now he was in the clear.

They accompanied the sailor as he carried the girl inside. They made sure her hood stayed on, especially with Myuri nearby.

With a sigh, Yosef, who had been minding the goopy, black liquid as it boiled, handed the mixing stick off to someone else.

“I’m so sorry we keep interrupting your work.”

“Nonsense.”

Yosef spoke while wiping his hands on his apron, but he wore a troubled expression.

But Col understood it was not because they were bothering him as he worked when he continued to speak.

“But what is this all about? This is the very person who came to the ship looking for you, Sir Col.”

“What?”

There were people who caught wind of his fame and wished to use him.

Since that girl had been called a demon at the cathedral, perhaps it was a problem involving faith.

“But...I don’t understand. When we went up to visit the cathedral, we saw her getting kicked out by a father. He was acting threateningly toward her, but I had not imagined he would be so violent.”

“What?”

Yosef’s face grew pale hearing about the violence at the cathedral.

“I wanted to take her to the trading house, but...my legs can only endure so much.”

Col spoke shamefully, but when Yosef looked at his knees, the man burst out laughing.

“Yours is a different burden to bear. I’ll take care of worldly affairs.”

“Thank you.”

“Have you contacted Sir Sligh?”

When Yosef asked, Col thought for a moment.

“I want to hear what she has to say first.”

The girl was not human. Bringing her to the trading house might cause problems.

“Let me know right away if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

Yosef nodded and saw them off with an anxious face before returning to stirring the pot.

Col crossed the ramp and headed toward the stern of the ship as the sailors traveled about working on repairs. The captain’s room was toward the back, so if the girl was being kept anywhere, that would be the place.

Sure enough, an errand boy with a tubful of water was holding the door open, and Myuri was dealing with him.

When she noticed him, she shrunk, like a baby mouse hiding in a crack in the wall.

She acted like this whenever her mischief had wrought terrible consequences

back at the bathhouse in Nyohhira. He wondered what she had done this time, but he realized that it was simply because the open door was making her uncomfortable.

“Is she awake?”

Col handed a few copper pieces to the boy who had brought the water, then closed the door behind him as he raised the question.

The windows were closed, but there was a candle burning in the glass lamp, so it was not too dark.

Myuri’s expression looked uneasy in the candlelight, and she shook her head.

“Is...she really a sheep?”

Myuri nodded wordlessly, either because she was minding the sleeping girl or because of distress.

“A sheep in the kingdom...could it be...?”

As he searched his memory, he felt Myuri’s gaze on him. When he looked at her, she immediately looked away.

With a bitter smile, he explained it to her.

“Do you remember how I came here with your parents when I was a child? We met someone who was the avatar of a sheep then. I don’t know if it was true or not, but he was the sheep with golden wool that appears in the Kingdom of Winfiel’s founding myth. He went on to secretly create a habitat for his sheep companions in the kingdom.”

The girl may have been one of them.

There were very few nonhumans who lived in human society.

But even those who did were often limited to ones who knew humans they could truly rely on and trust, or otherwise possessed remarkable talent. A pebble mixed into wheat ground by a stone mortar would surely be found one day and picked out. Stones were stones and wheat was wheat; both stones and wheat could not become the same flour.

“But...if that is true, then I don’t quite understand how she’s dressed.”

Myuri glanced at him, her expression apparently indicating that she thought her brother knew nothing about clothes. While he had little knowledge about fashion, he had learned enough from his journey far south when he was a child to know about different styles of clothes.

“The embroidery on her sash is a southern style, plus look at her hood. It’s printed calico, which isn’t common around here.”

The teenage girl listened intently to his discussion about clothing.

While she did not seem comfortable enough to talk to him, her tail made it clear she wanted to hear more.

“It’s made from a material called cotton. I’ve never actually seen it before, but...it’s a unique kind of cloth they bring from the hot, southern countries. From what I’ve heard, it’s a plant that bears fruits stuffed with woolen yarn instead of ears of wheat. In a book written by a wandering preacher I once read, he said it was a plant that bore sheep.”

Myuri suddenly looked at him dubiously.

“...I do not actually believe that sheep grow from it, but nonetheless, she is wearing something we cannot obtain in these parts. Moreover, she is in traveling clothes. She must have come from far away.”

The girl must have needed him to talk with the priest.

The sheep girl’s tightly shut eyes added to her pained expression, as though she was in the middle of a bad dream. What was it she wanted?

It was almost like he hoped her objective was something he might be able to help with.

“Ah—”

He looked up when he heard Myuri mutter and saw that the sheep girl was grimacing, her eyes still closed. When she then went to roll over, she suddenly jumped up into a sitting position. Her round eyes were opened wide, signaling her disorientation.

“Are you all right?”

When Col spoke, the sheep girl gulped and looked at him. She instinctively

placed her hand on her chest, either looking for a dagger or making sure the parchment she had at the cathedral was still there.

For a few moments, it was silent. They could hear the lively voices of the harbor outside the room and the cries of seabirds. She must have known immediately that she was in a room on a ship and the ones facing her were the two she met at the cathedral. She should have noticed that her wallet and parchment were intact in her breast pocket, as well.

The girl's hand dropped from her chest, her guard relaxing. But once her eyes settled on Myuri, she tensed up all over again.

A wolf and a sheep. For them to be in the same room would only create tension. Myuri huddled in the corner not because she felt uncomfortable around Col but because she was thinking about the girl.

Col first cleared his throat, drawing her attention to him, then introduced himself.

"My name is Tote Col. That is my traveling companion, Myuri. She is the kin of wolves, but she doesn't bite."

When he explained, she looked at him, then back to Myuri.

She opened her mouth to speak but no words came out, and he could tell she had not entirely calmed down yet.

He poured some water from the pitcher into a small cup and handed it to her.

She accepted it but did not drink from it and took a deep breath instead.

"...My apologies. It was so sudden, I was shocked..."

Field sheep sometimes fainted at the slightest loud noise. It was likely that she could not handle meeting a wolf so suddenly.

It was still rude, however, to faint upon seeing someone. She gave Myuri a proper apology, who had been trying to shrink herself down as much as she could, and relieved, she shook her head, then drew close to Col.

"You lost consciousness in front of the cathedral, so we carried you to the harbor. I could not carry you all the way to where we are staying, so I've brought you here to our ship."

As though she had finally understood what was going on, she nodded slowly.

Then she adjusted her clothes and sat at the edge of the bed.

“Thank you for helping me.”

“Of course. I’m glad to see you’re not hurt.”

The priest had been much too violent for the sake of a mere argument. It was entirely possible she could have been seriously injured if she had been struck in the wrong place when the priest tossed her out.

“But I hope you don’t mind me asking you what you were doing at the cathedral?”

He broached the subject with the intention of making small talk, but her expression was immediately marred by tension.

He had hoped he could hide who he was while still somehow feeling out what her intentions were, but that seemed much too self-centered.

Though he hesitated slightly, he decided avoiding lies would be for his benefit later.

“If you tell me your story, I may be able to help you.”

“...How?”

The girl’s curiosity was piqued, and Col offered a response.

“It’s likely that I am the person from the northern islands that you have been searching for.”

The girl held her breath and looked around. He could understand somewhat why she looked so tense.

There were any number of bad things that could happen after being brought into someone’s base and probed for answers.

“We are not surrounded or anything like that. This ship was caught up in a storm, and the crew is busy with repairs and inspections on deck.”

While she seemed somewhat satisfied with that explanation, he could easily tell that she was straining her ears.

Of course, Col too could hear the wholesome scene coming from the rest of the ship.

“Will you tell me what happened?”

When he asked this, the girl tightened her hands, which rested on her knees, into fists, and her whole body tensed.

However, her downcast face was not stubborn, simply hesitant.

The girl had surely not intended to tell them that she was the embodiment of a sheep. She certainly hadn't expected a wolf girl to be here, either.

He understood how she felt, so he sat quietly and waited.

Not only that, the girl seemed intelligent, and for the levelheaded air around her, she also gave off a feeling of bravery.

Just as he expected, it was not long before she lifted her head.

“...May I ask just one thing?”

“Of course.”

“Do you...understand us?”

The question was directed at Col.

In a room with a sheep, a wolf, and a human, the odd one out was the human.

“I cannot be entirely sure that I truly understand you, but I am doing all that I can to.”

He wanted to answer honestly but ended up only addressing the issue in a roundabout way. It was no surprise when the girl gave him a doubtful look, but when Myuri saw this, she spoke up.

“Brother understands us. Because I'm gonna marry him!”

“Wha—?”

Col could not tell whose cry of surprise that was, but Myuri pounced at him, and he hurriedly tore her away.

“I said nothing of the sort.”

He pushed her off, but she just clung to his arm again before speaking up.

“You show faith through actions, not words, right?”

“That’s...”

He might have said that when he lectured her once.

“Anyway, we will talk about this later—”

As they argued, the sheep girl, who had sat uneasily on the bed until that moment, stared blankly at them.

“I’m so sorry you had to see that...”

Dizzied by shame as he tried to admonish Myuri, he heard the soft sound of rustling linen. It was the girl, who could no longer hold back her laughter. At the same time, a meaningful smile had appeared on Myuri’s face. It seemed she had acted childish on purpose to cheer the sheep girl up.

But he sensed an ulterior motive, as though she was saying, *If things go well*, so he poked her on the head.

“You two are quite close.”

The sheep girl’s tension had eased with her laughter.

“But...married? Aren’t you...brother and sister?”

I swear—he cursed Myuri.

“This girl is the daughter of my master, and I have worked as her pseudo-elder brother since she was born. This is typical of young girls.”

When he said that, Myuri dug her nails into his arm, and he decided he would rather have that than her fangs. The sheep girl understood it all in just one breath. She nodded deeply.

“Not only are you looking for me but you also have sheep horns. I could not simply leave you be.”

There was no doubt that Myuri clinging to his arm was more convincing than a thousand words.

He could tell by how her face was set that she had made up her mind. She

immediately adjusted her posture and introduced herself.

“My name is Ilenia Gisele. I was born and raised in a faraway land of blue seas. I work for a trading firm from a distant country, and I normally broker wool in the kingdom.”

Since she was a sheep girl who purchased wool, she must have been quite the reputable broker.



His thoughts must have shown plainly on his face since the girl smiled childishly, fitting for her age—or at least for how old she appeared to be.

“But at the moment, I am temporarily working as a tax collector.”

“Tax collector?”

Col could not contain his surprise, and Ilenia produced the parchment from her breast pocket.

“I purchased a tax-collecting permit issued under the name of Heir Klevend of the Kingdom of Winfiel, and I was trying to make collections from the cathedral.”

He had heard once from Myuri’s father, the former merchant Lawrence, that it was fairly common to collect taxes through agents. Collecting taxes was quite an undertaking, so those in power would auction off those rights. If those who obtained them could collect the full amount, then they would profit from the difference of whatever they had paid in the auction.

Of course, it was an immense loss of profits if the buyer was not able to collect enough. There were very few people who would happily pay taxes to begin with.

“So you were thrown out?”

The girl nodded, took a deep breath, then spoke with a formal expression.

“But I did not start this to simply get rich quickly. I believe that meeting you here was fate.”

He shamelessly thought about how exaggerated that sounded.

Was not acting as tax-collecting agent just for pocket change?

It was just as he was thinking about that.

“Collecting taxes is just one part of my overall plan.”

Col found himself perplexed, and he responded in spite of himself.

“I’m sorry...but what?”

Ilenia leaned forward and spoke.

“I want to create a country just for nonhumans like us.”

“...”

Speechless, he looked back at Ilenia, and her black eyes stared at him fearlessly.

“Wherever we go, we must stay out of sight of humans and live in secret. There are those who gather as many friends as they can and live that way. But I don’t want that—I want to create a place that will sit proudly on a map.”

“That’s—”

Logical thoughts ran about in his head. For nonhumans to live in this world, they either had to keep quiet deep in the forest, disguise themselves as humans while melding seamlessly into daily life, or slip between the cracks of human systems.

In the modern world, there was no such thing as land that belonged to no one.

He reached one conclusion rather quickly.

“Are you trying to start a war?”

He knew well the great power of nonhumans. He knew of the large fangs and sharp claws that belonged to giant wolves. He knew stories of armies of a hundred being scattered in an instant.

War was certainly possible if she was gathering all the nonhumans in the world.

It had of course crossed his mind before, whenever he caught a glimpse of the strength of those who once lived in the old age of spirits.

However, he recalled what he had once heard from someone whose true form was a gigantic, towering wisewolf.

Even if they could defeat humans, they could not win against the human world.

The era where everything was determined by fang and claw was over.

Those who did not understand that were the young and ignorant ones, who

would have listened to this girl's story eagerly.

Ilenia, however, studied him warily before she continued.

"Anyone who deals with long-distance trade has heard the rumors at least once, that there's a land no one has seen at the edge of the sea far west of the kingdom. We will build our country there."

Myuri was digging her nails so deep into his arm it was beginning to hurt. She was already obsessed with adventure, and she was staring at Ilenia with wide eyes.

"If we can obtain that land, we will build a country where we do not have to hide who we are. No, not will—*have to*. You understand how wonderful this is, right...Myuri?"

Myuri had gazed at the large world map posted on the wall at the trading house in Atiph. The world was so big, and their home of Nyohhira was like a smudge in the corner.

But no matter where she went on that map, there was no place where she could freely reveal her true form.

She would surely say that no matter where she was, there was nowhere that could make her feel at ease, so she would take his hand, while claiming that the only place she felt safe was in his arms.

"You mean...I can be in my wolf form all the time?"

"Of course. You may live freely with your brother in any form you like."

Her last sentence possessed the flair of a skilled merchant, but it seemed to have worked on Myuri.

She was not gripping his arm with strength but with heat.

"B-but what does this have to do with collecting taxes?"

Col tugged on Myuri's hand to bring her back to her senses as she had become totally enraptured. That story that was like opening the seal on a jar, letting loose a giant snake that could swallow a cow.

Was Ilenia creating such a fantastic tale to confuse them?

“Tax collecting is just an excuse. I am after a relic that has been kept in the cathedral after many years of accumulating wealth.”

He remembered the word SWINDLER! plastered on the door.

“As a wool broker, I have visited a great number of monasteries that raise sheep. I’ve also investigated what sort of relics which monasteries will buy, and I came across word that the cathedral in this town had possibly bought something that could be a cloth belonging to Saint Nex.”

Col knew of Saint Nex. He was originally a cloth merchant who had amassed great wealth, but after receiving a revelation from God, he donated all his wealth to the poor, then became a saint who devoted his life to faith. He was often made the patron saint of craftsman associations that dealt with fabric and thread. Typical prayers to him included pleas that the thread they spun would not tear, that their fabric would not be eaten by bugs, and that there were no fires.

He was a rather plain saint, not quite matching up to the grandiose vision Ilenia talked about.

Col felt that relics such as a stone that God stepped on when he once descended to earth or a sword left behind by the seventh angel would be much more suited for such an extravagant story.

A saint who touched winding rods and rolls of fabric was not that reliable.

“What would you do with that cloth? Would you draw a map to that land you spoke about?”

“Unfortunately, no, it’s not for a map. But you were close, in a way, because it *will* guide us to the new world. We will use it to make our sails.”

“Sails?”

“The cloth of Saint Nex is blessed and sanctified. It is supposedly the strongest cloth imaginable in this world. Whether that legend is true or just an exaggeration, I think there could be nothing more perfect to use for a ship that will travel to the end of the sea.”

“Do you plan on making that ship?”

“If possible, I want to find the ark that God sent when a great flood covered the entire world.”

It was hard to tell if Ilenia was joking or if she was serious.

But he saw in her the strength of a sheep traveling the wastelands, perhaps because her hooves were firmly planted in the ground.

“Of course, I personally don’t believe in the God who everyone talks about, so I’m not trying to make a ship filled with saintly, miraculous relics. It will be a *tribute* to someone who wants to build a ship like that.”

There was a strong smile on Ilenia’s face, her excitement growing as she talked about her dreams.

“They say that one of the kingdom’s adventuring ships once traveled to the new world. No one besides the kingdom has these voyage logs and sea charts. My plan is to gather and present relics that might offer the most protection on the journey, and once they set off for the new world again, they will include our ship in the fleet. I made my bid on the collection permit so that I had an excuse to open the doors to churches and cathedrals. If they cooperate in paying taxes, then I, of course, will happily earn the kingdom’s good favor. In the end, I see this tax collection as a way to save money for our journey to the new world.”

This did not sound like something she had thought up just the other day.

There was an odd realism to it.

“B-but there are talks that the kingdom and the Church might go to war. The war with the pagans lasted for decades, and this one might endure for just as long. I don’t know if this is the time to be dreaming up such adventures...”

Then Ilenia shook her head. Her body language showed that he was completely off the mark, as if she was talking to an unreasonable child.

“What would you say if I told you the reason the kingdom and Church opposed each other was for that very reason?”

His thoughts ground to a halt.

“...What?”

“They say that the reasons are because the kingdom confronted the Church

about taxes and how the Church has misbehaved for so long. But don't you think it's strange? I think it's much too long overdue, and the kingdom is also profiting from this corruption. Not only that, but there have been absolutely no negotiations with other countries. While some have stood up in indignation since then, that is quite unnatural. It almost seems like the kingdom is trying to place distance between them and the Church on purpose."

However, Col himself had been so moved when he heard the story that he left the village, so he did not think it was strange.

"I...don't know about that. The flames of revolution have actually been set ablaze in Atiph. Here in the kingdom, the scripture is being translated into the common language, so that the faith of the people may be..."

"I understand you don't believe me right away. But I am positive that the new world exists. No, all of us nonhumans, all of us who others say are possessed by demons, need to be certain that it does."

If she were willing to say that much, she must have had some sort of clue.

The sheep girl firmly lowered her head, much like how rams did when they fought.

"They say that only a few survivors returned in just one ship from the new world. I heard that the surviving sailors said that the land at the edge of the sea was home to a demon. Their companions were ripped to shreds by it. It gave off a roar that could split the sea, and it was so big that every footprint it made left a lake behind. When the sailors barely escaped with their lives under the cover of night, jumping into their ship after they managed to get offshore, they turned around, and there, they finally got a good look at the whole demon. It was so massive, it could sit on a mountain, and its outstretched paw could reach the moon in the sky—"

At that moment, Col could not believe it. He knew this story.

There was once a monk who had gathered all the remaining myths from around the world. He had collected the tales of pagan gods to see whether or not the God that he believed in existed. A wolf that lived in wheat. A sheep of golden wool that walked leisurely across the plains. A snake so gigantic the weather between its head and tail were different. A huge deer with living trees

growing from its head that lived for an eternity. The prominent figures from these stories, which had been thought of as senseless pagan fantasies, had one peculiar thing in common—at a certain point in time, they all suddenly disappeared. Though human power was absolutely no match for them, they had abruptly disappeared from the face of history.

People say they had lost their lives in a mythical battle.

A fight against the king of kings in the era of forests and spirits.

“The Moon-Hunting...Bear...”

They had been scattered by this tyrant.

“Anyone who knows the tale will immediately think of that. And humans who know the story of the Moon-Hunting Bear are few and far between.”

Col knew the story because he had traveled with Myuri’s parents.

It was not the sort of tale one simply happened upon but the kind that people would have had to search for before finally finding it.

“According to legend, after the battle, the Moon-Hunting Bear disappeared across the sea to the west. I don’t think this bear—which is said to have unearthed mountains, thrown them into the sea, and created an island—would disguise itself as a human to live in this world now. But no one has seen it since then. There are too many humans to live hidden in this world. So I believe it.”

“That the Moon-Hunting Bear...lives on the land at the edge of the sea?”

Ilenia nodded.

“What if the kingdom doesn’t merely believe that the long-indolent Church’s blade of faith would be unreliable in a fight with the demon, but that a visible fight over rights would just get in the way? In the war against the pagans many years ago, the Church managed to wrest away control over many spoils of war. They must think they can’t follow in those footsteps.”

A single cook was good enough for the broth.

“Don’t you think the reason why the kingdom is developing their shipbuilding technology so quickly and importing so much lumber from the mountains on the mainland is to prepare for a journey to the new world?”

Nyohhira was rather remote in the mountains, but he knew that lumber flowed down the river from even deeper in the wilderness to be sold. The cloth woven in the villages dotted around deep in the mountains passed straight through Nyohhira to be sold in towns at the bottom of the river, and most of it became sails for ships.

The buyers were in the Kingdom of Winfiel, because their production of long-distance trading ships was flourishing.

“I believe that if the new world is the key in this story, it explains a great many of the kingdom’s actions. If we let this golden opportunity go, then we will forever live in the shadows of the human world. Gaining Saint Nex’s cloth from the cathedral in this town is a huge step toward freedom. So, please, I want you to help...No.”

Like the poor begging for mercy before the Church, Ilenia faced Col and Myuri.

“Why don’t you join me in my plans? We can make great progress with you, Master Col, and your unquestionable power in the human world, along with the power of a wolf, the ruler of the forests.”

It may all have been Ilenia’s delusions. In studying faith, Col knew that sometimes, people only ever saw the things they wanted to see.

Moreover, there was a reason he did not want to believe what she claimed so easily.

If she was right, if it turned out to be true that everything going on was actually about the new world, that meant the kingdom was not paying attention to the true righteousness of faith at all. It meant that they were simply maneuvering to keep the new land all to themselves and were trying to abandon the Church.

If that were the case, then those trying to right the wrongs of the Church, those who fought believing that a new faith would spread throughout the world were nothing but fools.

They would be pawns in the political strife between those in power, and nothing would be solved for the people who stood at the bottom.

There was malice in Ilenia's story that Col did not want to believe.

"Bro...ther?"

Then Myuri whispered to him. She seemed uneasy because, to her, there was no reason not to cooperate with Ilenia.

But he could not come to a decision so quickly.

Ilenia's story threatened to flip the world as Col knew it on its head. There was a new land at the edge of the sea, the Moon-Hunting Bear lived there, and the kingdom was trying to claim it to stake out a new country—there was absolutely no way he could believe that all at once. Not to mention that it would also mean the kingdom was facing off with the Church for such selfish interests.

He wondered for a moment if Hyland knew about all this.

On the other hand, if Ilenia's dreams were a reality, then it would be great news for those who had no choice but to live out of sight from humans in this day and age. This was true for Myuri as well, who was finding life difficult. Even the embodiment of a whale, Autumn, who they had met in the northern islands, had been deeply hurt after losing his only companion. Had someone gotten close to him and become his friend, then he might have fulfilled a different role in the north.

Much like how people gathered at the Church, nonhumans, too, needed a place to feel at peace.

Should he not support those who saw the light of hope? At the very least, he should not be agitated or complacent.

The commander of the mercenary company that bore the same name as Myuri once said the most dangerous thing in battle was not an encounter with a strong enemy, but stopping at a place after losing sight of how the battle was progressing.

And so Col's words formed quickly.

"There are many parts of your story that I find hard to believe. And supposing that it is true, I have reason not to join you so easily. Even as Myuri's older

brother, I cannot agree with the current state of affairs.”

“B-Brother?”

Myuri tugged his sleeve, but he silenced her with his gaze.

“May I ask for some time?”

Ilenia did not look disappointed, dejected, or irritated. She stared straight at him, then pulled back the hand she held out. There was no mistaking that she was an excellent broker.

“I understand.”

Myuri watched in bewilderment as Ilenia bowed her head.

“Shall I come to this ship for your response?”

“No, we will come find you.”

“Very well. I am staying at an inn called the Silver Bow. I have also made it my base for wool trade here, so if you give my name to any trading firm in town, you should be able to get confirmation right away.”

She understood very well that he doubted her.

It was a different sort of toughness than Myuri’s.

Ilenia stood and bowed her head deeply, as though paying him homage. Then her horns vanished.

“Thank you so much for helping me.”

She opened the door. As the bright sunlight and busy sounds of the ship flooded in, it felt like time had started moving again. It was almost as though all the things they talked about in that room were merely a dream.

Ilenia confidently crossed the ramp and stood at the pier. She gave them a weary and anxious smile, bowed shortly, then walked off.

As her figure quickly vanished among the crowds, a long sigh escaped Col’s mouth.

Everything that Ilenia had talked about was difficult to process. The reason why the kingdom and the Church were in conflict, how there was a land that no

one had seen far to the west, and how the Moon-Hunting Bear lived there—it was all lined up neatly for him, and he felt as if he had been placed before an impossible mountain.

“Brother?”

Myuri murmured vacantly.

“What should I get excited about first?”

As she was the sort to get excited when she saw the place they processed wool, Col knew that he was not the only restless one. They both had to stay grounded.

Col gripped her little hand and spoke.

“No matter how much good food is set on the table, we can only eat so much at once.”

He had to look into every detail. Like Sligh had said, it may have been by God’s will they had been blown in this direction.

The lively bustle of the harbor rang uncomfortably in his ears.

In one corner of the harbor, there were steps carved out of stone that led to the surface of the sea.

Col placed his hands in the water as little waves lapped up against the shore, then clicked two silver coins together.

“I thought my hearing was good, but can he really hear this?”

Myuri stood beside him, doubtful.

“I’ve heard that sound travels very well in the water...Well, if it doesn’t work, then we can just write a letter.”

“Place your hands in the water and beat in the rhythm of a dance with a hard object. Then, wherever you are, I can generally reach you in one day.”

The whale avatar they had met in the northern islands, Autumn, had told them that.

Col felt bad for calling him not even a month after that offer, but he needed to ask someone who was of the sea.

“And then throw in a piece of the Black-Mother.”

He produced a small black mass from a bag and threw it into the water. It was about as big as the tip of his pinkie and practically resembled rabbit droppings.

It was a kind of gem called jet and had similar properties to amber.

Myuri held another piece in her hand and was sniffing it, but she shrugged and returned it to the bag.

“We will come back tomorrow morning.”

He stood and they went back up the stairs. He wanted to ask Yosef about the rumors whispered among merchants involved in long-distance trade, but the man seemed busy, so he left it for later. Col could always ask at dinnertime.

He wiped his hands and noticed Myuri was still standing at the bottom of the stairs, gazing out across the sea.

“Is something the matter?”

She shook her head, and then he came up the stairs.

“When I was in Nyohhira, I thought the mountains went on forever, no matter where you went.”

But in reality, the mountains ended where the fields spread below them and eventually reached the sea.

Then what was at the end of the sea?

Everyone who had seen these vast waters must have wondered it at least once.

“I...was once told that there is a waterfall at the end of the sea.”

It did not matter if that was true or not. Col thought of it as a stopgap explanation for a question with no answer that people sometimes thought about before falling asleep.

“But it’s also true that answers like that from the Church have always been met with a question mark.”

When he said that, Myuri looked up at him with curious, childlike eyes.

“Because if there truly is a waterfall, then what is at the bottom of it? See?”

“Then what is there? Does it keep going from land to sea to land to sea?”

He could have tricked her in his answer.

But he did not, since to treat her as a child would be doing her a disservice.

“The alchemists trying to unlock the world’s secrets say that the world is round.”

He balled up the handkerchief in his hands and showed it to her.

“They say that the world looks like this, and if you keep going west, you’ll eventually come back from the east.”

Those alchemists also said that there were several round worlds like this one and called them the sun, the moon, and the planets. The land they stood on was nothing more than one of those planets.

The Church often grew agitated over that line of thought and refuted it.

It differed too much from the worldview spoken of in the scripture.

“So it doesn’t mean that there’s an end to the world, right?”

Despite never stopping to consider the Church’s teachings, Myuri accepted that without a second thought. Though he had thought about denying it, too, there were great monks with years of experience in astronomy that came to Nyohhira who supported this idea. He wanted Myuri to learn correct knowledge, but the problem lay in deciding what was correct.

While he thought about it, Myuri suddenly spoke in a cold voice he had never heard from her before.

“Good. That means I’ll definitely find that Moon-Hunting Bear one day.”

“ ... ”

Col was at a loss for words, and he looked at the girl walking beside him.

There stood the figure of an innocent, tomboyish child who spent all her days getting angry and laughing.

But in her red eyes was a wolf, harboring the colors of hate.

“I was named after one of Mother’s old friends, right? I know that it killed her friend—”

Col only let her say that much as he pulled her into a tight hug.

There were people all around them, and he did not even consider that they would look at them oddly.

People bumped into his shoulders as they busily moved about, but he did not budge.

He held her slender frame tightly to put out the fire starting in the brush.

He could not let the flame of revenge burn in such a young body and soul.

“...This is one of the reasons why I cannot trust Miss Ilenia’s story.”

The usual Myuri would hug him back or rub her face in his chest, even if she was fast asleep.

But now her arms hung limp at her sides.

“The existence of the Moon-Hunting Bear has a great meaning not just to your mother and her companions but also to all those from the age of spirits. If the legend is true, then I cannot imagine what Miss Ilenia plans to do when she confronts it.”

If they intended to make a country for nonhumans in the new world, then they either had to accept the Moon-Hunting Bear as their king or drive it away. Guessing from the legends, he could not imagine it would end on a friendly note.

Ilenia must have thought about it as well, so she must have had some sort of plan.

Perhaps they would kill it.

“At the very least, there is one thing I ask of you.”

He let go of her, placed his hands firmly on her slender shoulders, and peered at her. Though she never breathed a word about it back in Nyohhira, this girl was strongly aware of the blood that flowed through her body. Even in the north, she had wondered if the legendary Black-Mother was a wolf deity, too.

Myuri's mother, the wisewolf Holo, had lost all her companions. Almost all of them died in the fight with the Moon-Hunting Bear. It must have been so painful for her, but she had lived for many years and had the skill to set aside problems she could not solve.

But Myuri was young, and everything in her eyes shined with a new light. She likely wanted to find her kin who no longer existed except in the pages of a book and felt intense anger toward a being who had done them wrong.

It was possible that he himself, a human, had no right to say anything to this girl. But before he was a human, he was Myuri's brother.

"Never, ever think about taking revenge. It happened long, long ago in an era long forgotten."

She did not respond, nor did she look at him.

Instead, she dropped her head, as though nodding, and rested her face on his arms that gripped her shoulders.

"Ever since we left the village, I sometimes feel more like a wolf than I ever thought I was."

Col felt nervous when she said that, but she lifted her head and looked straight at him, then smiled, uneasy.

"Don't make that face. As long as you hug me, I won't go anywhere, Brother."

While he could have also taken that as a confession of decadent love, the reason Myuri calmed in his arms was not for a child's simple reasons. Much like how he forced himself into abstinence and moderation for his faith, there were many things she persevered through without telling anyone.

He did not think he could ease all her problems, but he would do all he could.

"Please feel free to talk to me about anything. I'm not a very reliable brother, but I will risk everything to help you."

Myuri closed her eyes and offered him a refreshing smile, as though her cheek was being caressed by a sweet summer breeze.

"Then marry me."

Her eyes opened, and they were filled with her usual mischief.

“...No.”

“Stingy.”

“That is not what this is about.”

As she chuckled, she took hold of him.

He could tell she was hiding some deep feelings about the Moon-Hunting Bear, but forcing her to reveal them would make her consideration for him meaningless.

Much like how she called him “Brother,” there were many things that could not change so easily. Myuri knew that very well.

“But a journey beyond the ends of the sea sounds like so much fun.”

And that, too, was how she really felt. Col had many things to think about.

“Here we go, out from the pot and into the fire.”

He groaned, and Myuri replied.

“I don’t think that has to be a bad thing.”

Youth wasn’t simply about appearance.

“You’re right. We will think positively.”

Myuri smiled and nodded.

And so, they casually went out into town to see what sort of reputation Ilenia had. Myuri also wanted to look at clothes, so as she picked some out at the front of the shop, Col asked about Ilenia.

“A wool broker? Ha-ha, sir, how many brokers do you think there are in this town? They come in swarms from all over the mainland to import, so I can’t remember them all.”

The first shopkeeper had answered curtly, so he steeled himself for the worst, but conversation with the next store owner went easily.

“A girl with black hair that brokers wool? Yeah, I know her. Oh, miss, that’s top-quality sheepskin. There’s a secret to the tanning process. Plus, look, see

how soft and light it is? Whatever you use it for, it'll turn into a great product. And here we have a newly made coat, and here's a rug...Huh? Oh right, the broker. She's so young, but there are lots of faraway firms that trust her enough to go through her when buying our wool. What, you thinking about having her do some work for you and checking her out? Well, she does good work compared to some of the other idiots out there. I haven't heard of her running off with payments or showing any favoritism, after all. Oh, and by the way, that sheepskin goes for about forty silver coins of the sun. How 'bout it?"

Other shopkeepers responded in a similar way. It seemed common for merchants to have someone from their hometown or someone they could trust carry out trade in faraway lands where it wasn't easy to travel. Ilenia apparently had a bit of influence in the wool trade, so she used her position for buying.

Of course, that meant she had to be not only capable but also trustworthy. All the merchants who knew her wanted her to work in their home companies.

"She's the sort to fall in love with her employer."

There was even a merchant who mentioned that. Myuri's interest was rather piqued when she heard that information and seemed happy about that, but Col did not ask why.

"She sounds like a trustworthy businesswoman."

While they walked, Col told Myuri the impression he had gotten. She was busy sniffing the scent of some soap infused with herbs that they had bought at the last store, and only her eyes moved to look at him.

"I'd be suspicious if she was a fox, but I wonder if it's because sheep don't tell lies."

"Do you think that's why?"

"Just a hunch."

If her preconceptions were correct, then wolves, too, would have to be considered treacherous.

He thought it over at first, but he sighed to himself—he was not wrong.

The linen bag hanging from Myuri's shoulders was stuffed with her spoils. He

could not help but think that it was a cold and calculated move on her part. She knew that if she asked for things now, he would willingly open his wallet. In reality, after he had seen the danger inside her heart after hearing about the Moon-Hunting Bear, it would have been difficult for him to be strict with her even if she had asked for things meekly. Though there was plenty to consider when it came to her shrewdness, he also felt as though she was calming him down by acting as her usual self, making it even more difficult for him to refuse.

The reason was that it reminded him that she was not only a cute pup but a wolf.

“The sun is about to set, so why don’t we return to the trading house?”

“Yeah. I’m hungry.”

She placed the soap back in the bag, as if disappointed she could not eat the fragrant piece.

“But I don’t really want lamb today...”

He would not be able to stop thinking about that once he started, but she had her own way of considering things.

No matter how Ilenia’s story turned out, he only had to make sure that Myuri came out unscathed.

There was no doubt this concerned the very core of her nonhumanity.

He had been totally reliant on her in the northern islands, so this time, he wanted to be the shield that protected her.

“Oh, look, Brother, the first star!”

He looked up, and on the clear field that faded from bright red to dark blue, a single point twinkled like ice in the sky.

“Taxes on the Church?”

Sligh tilted his head as he ate his beef shoulder steak, which had been boiled, fried, steamed, thinly cut, then covered in a mustard sauce.

When they returned to the trading house, Sligh had already prepared food for them and waited, and as soon as Yosef arrived, they feasted. Myuri had lost out

to sleepiness the night before, but today she was determined to eat it all.

“Yes. Are the churches and monasteries throughout the kingdom taxed?”

Col had to consider everything Ilenia talked about carefully, but what he could simply not overlook was the real reason the kingdom and the Church were in conflict.

However, he could not suddenly ask Sligh if the kingdom was trying to separate from the Church as part of a bigger plan to head the new world, and he did not think he would receive an answer even if he did. So after careful consideration, that was how he broached the subject.

If Ilenia’s thoughts were correct, then he should be able to catch a glimpse of the kingdom’s plans through these taxes.

Finding taxes that were levied without just cause, something that was enacted simply to snatch up assets, would give her story credibility.

On the other hand, if there was a proper reason, then it was possible she was reading too deeply into the kingdom’s policies.

“Yes, absolutely. Because to call their actions tyranny would be an understatement, so of course we levied taxes.”

Sligh’s answer stung him more than he imagined.

“Which means they are punitive taxes, I suppose?”

“Yes. As if to say, return the fortunes you have dishonestly amassed, and never commit evil like this again. Any sort of announcement of taxation is unpopular, but this was one of the very few that the people cheered for.”

Sligh did not seem as though he was telling a joke.

But after hearing about the Church’s wrongdoings, one thing immediately came to mind.

The papers plastered all over the cathedral doors.

“I saw the doors to the cathedral. Is that related to this?”

Sligh nodded.

“We could talk about that until the sun rose.”

He spoke jokingly, but he did not smile.

“They had been working as moneylenders.”

That word reminded him of something he had read on the door.

But surely the Church forbade collecting such interest. Had they been loaning money publicly, then surely the papal office would have carried out an investigation.

“Of course, they cleverly kept it under wraps. To the public, it was all goodwill.”

As Sligh spoke, Yosef reached out from beside him to pour alcohol into Col’s cup. It was a rather strong distilled liquor with a smoky taste. He let Myuri have a sip, since she was at an age where she was eager to grow up faster, but the moment it touched her tongue, she practically threw it back at him.

He tensed; this must be the kind of conversation that called for a drink like this.

Sligh gulped down the drink that Yosef had poured for him, then began to speak.

“I don’t know about other countries, but the entire organization of the Church in the kingdom was extracting profits from the wool industry.”

There were wool products all over the room Sligh had provided for them, too. The blankets and rugs went without saying, but the cloth on the wall to keep the room warm and drapes over the furniture were all mostly made from wool. Using wool was the same as breathing.

And the kingdom was renowned throughout the world for its wool.

“There are problems in the structure of the wool trade, so it takes a very long time to turn a profit for most people involved. Do you know how long it takes for wool to go from the sheep to clothes to money?”

Col answered with what he believed to be a generous guess.

“About a year?”

“Three years on average.”

As he sat surprised, Sligh took a piece of mutton and placed it on Myuri's plate. He grinned at her, so she reluctantly accepted it, though she had decided not to eat lamb today. She thanked him awkwardly.

While Myuri fretted over her internal struggle, Sligh compared the food on the table to wool and continued to explain.

"Raise the sheep; shear the sheep; collect the wool; carry it elsewhere; wash it; separate it by quality; comb it; make it into thread; dye it; weave the fabric; make the clothes; sell the clothes, fabric, and thread; and then finally, wool and work become money. Of course, it does not always happen consecutively, and sometimes products sit in storage, or on the shelves in stores, unsold. Clothing, especially, will go unnoticed if the style isn't popular. Then once that's all done and the wool products become money, that money travels backward through the production process before it finally reaches the shepherds."

It was just one of the many complicated structures in the world, but Col could not tell where the problem was.

As he wondered what it might be, Sligh took a piece of bread in his hands.

"The problem is that they have to find a way to make ends meet until the money comes in."

He popped the bread into his mouth.

"Speaking logically, no one, from the first shepherds to the last merchants, receives payment if the wool stays unsold as clothing or thread. The shepherds who start the process at the very beginning have to wait three years until they get paid for their work. Everyone has to live and work while they wait. But living costs money, and workers need to buy materials in order to keep working."

They needed the things they lacked.

There were plenty of opportunities for moneylending in the wool industry.

"But it would cause problems if the Church loaned out hard currency, so the cathedral here in Desarev and other churches loaned out the wool from sheep raised on their own land, bought back the semi-processed product, then loaned that out as well. That way, they received goods that were in the next step of the process. They would, for example, lend out a bunch of wool, then buy back the

thread, lend out the thread, and buy back the dyed product. Logically, it wasn't moneylending if they were simply lending things out and then taking other things in return. Rather, when they took something back, they would even give the artisans money. What benevolence!"

But that could typically be considered wages, and it did not sound as though they were giving out lots of money.

"But the money they gave to the artisans was very little."

Sligh nodded, then cut a thin piece of his steak as if to represent that.

"When we merchants lend money, we charge an interest that won't earn the anger of the Church. Say, ten to twenty percent in a year. If you calculate the Church's hidden interest, taking into account the artisan's wages, then it easily goes over fifty percent in a year, sometimes even up to a hundred."

"Th-that much...?"

There was no word for that but usury.

"The Church gained most of its donations from the land they owned, and since the majority of their land was for raising sheep, that made the Church the greatest shepherds in the kingdom. They had a strong grip on almost all of the source material. Not only that but they managed the artisans with coin, so us merchants could not even compete. They pushed the process that took the most time onto the commercial firms, the final step of vending the finished product, and the artisans had to put up with receiving little pay for their work processing the wool. That doesn't encourage them to work. So for a long time, despite the low quality of work, the kingdom focused solely on exporting wool to get rich quick."

That must have been the state of the country Col saw when he was a child.

"It was only the Church, who owned the land and raised the sheep, that amassed wealth from this process, while the artisans who worked on the rest of the wool-making process grew poorer and poorer."

The northern islands had been in awful shape, but the situation of the kingdom that Sligh talked about was much the same.

But he did not feel any sense of despair as Sligh continued to talk about it in the past tense.

“The kingdom was revolted by this and had apparently thought up various plots, but they did not reach a fundamental breakthrough. Instead...”

Sligh closed his eyes, irritated, and sighed.

“On a whim, they adjusted the policies on wool exports, so then the wool trade became something akin to gambling. It made a fool of so many merchants and nobles, and a great number of people went bankrupt.”

Col was personally familiar with this story. Fallen nobles typically gave their daughters to affluent merchants, effectively exchanging their family name for money in order to preserve it. Then, after being bought out, a merchant husband failed in his enterprise and fell completely into poverty.

The wolflike female merchant he had met when he was a child was a former noble who had gone through all those changes, and the cause of her bankruptcy was likely the wool trade. It was not that she was especially unlucky; she was just one of many who had been swallowed up by the Winfiel Kingdom’s policies.

Eve Bolan was the name of this former noble, and after her husband went bankrupt she made up her mind to become a merchant. Now, despite being a woman, she was apparently a prominent dealer in the south.

Perhaps because of how wolflike she was, she had managed to spring back from her hardships, but most people were not like her.

It was possible that a pent-up resentment still lingered in the kingdom toward the Church; that because of them, the people’s destinies had been tossed about like toys.

Even that was a well enough reason to levy taxes on them.

“In any case, neither the kingdom nor the commercial firms could dominate the Church. They had to keep stride with the pope for the war with the pagans, after all. Once the war was over, however, the situation began to change, and when the kingdom stood up to the Church, their roles in the balance of power were reversed.”

There was a gleeful expression on Sligh's face as he stuck the knife into his steak.

"Once the Church's religious offices were closed, they lost their income, and their control over the artisans through their lending scheme slackened. The artisans began working harder, causing the quality as well as the amount of wool to shoot up, which attracted skilled workers from the mainland. Not only that, but since the Church had to use the kingdom's resources in order to export, they had no choice but to exchange their wool, which no longer readily moved in the market, for dirt cheap prices. The whole kingdom was overflowing with wool. There was so much, in fact, that townspeople who didn't used to have anything to do with the wool industry came to work in droves. Everyone earned more wages, and the whole country prospered."

The honest joy that Col initially assumed people got from their work now seemed more like happiness derived from being freed from the shackles that had bound them until then.

"The reason we've taxed the Church is to remove their assets, and on the off chance the situation reverses, we want to make sure that they won't be able to stand on their own for a while. There is also the part where we profit from their finances and gain popularity with the people."

According to Sligh, the kingdom's countermeasures were perfectly reasonable. The Church was being taxed for good reasons, all justifiable.

He felt like it was unrelated to the absurd plot of abandoning the Church to head to the new world.

This meant that while Ilenia's story had lost some of his persuasive power, the act of collecting taxes itself was not so far off from his own goals.

The tyrannical Church should be punished and corrected.

"Is the collection of taxes going well at all?"

Sligh shook his head.

"No. The Church's authority is deeply rooted, and the town merchants won't bid on collecting permits in fear of the consequences. It is not going well."

“I see...”

“That’s the gist of it, but...Do you mind if I ask you one thing?”

Col was pulled out of his thoughts and looked at Sligh.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Yes, of course.”

With a smile, Sligh then looked at him with a shrewd gaze.

“Where did you hear about the taxes?”

This was not the kind of thing one stumbled upon simply by wandering around town.

It was only natural that Sligh took special notice of it.

“We met a person when we paid a visit to the cathedral. We saw her just as she was being thrown out, and we heard her story.”

When Col explained, Yosef, who had been listening quietly, interjected.

“She was the one who had heard rumors about Sir Col and came to my ship to see him.”

It seemed Sligh had grasped the general picture.

But Col did not understand why he suddenly looked up to the ceiling and covered his eyes with his hands.

As he watched him absently, Sligh’s posture returned to normal, and he spoke, as though confessing his sins.

“That means that someone has made a request for you to help collect taxes.”

“R-right.”

“And while you feel the righteous need to reform the Church, you are first gathering information to decide whether you will cooperate or not.”

“Ah, well, yes, that’s...”

There were many missing elements, but he was generally correct.

“Oh God.”

Sligh groaned and gave him a puppy-eyed look.

“I would have asked you straight away yesterday if I knew this were going to happen.”

“What?”

Col’s surprise was apparent, and Sligh confessed sadly, “I am a merchant. With you around, Sir Col, collecting taxes from the Church would have been as easy as collecting candy from a baby. Anyone would think of that. Oh...if I asked you the same thing now, would you feel any sense of justice?”

Sligh’s eyes were sharp and knew exactly what was going on. He knew well that the exact same circumstances could carry a completely different meaning with just a few differences.

“...I’m sorry, but it only seems like a moneymaking venture...”

“Right?”

As though he had suddenly lost all his affectations, Sligh lethargically slumped in the chair, leaning against the back, and spoke sullenly. Col could tell by Yosef’s wry smile that he was not serious but purposefully putting on a show.

“But had I broached the subject yesterday, it would have been obvious that I had ulterior motives to use you, and either way, my reputation would be hurt. Would you care to appreciate how prudent I was to wait for the right moment?”

As Sligh readjusted himself in his chair, Col could not help but smile.

He did not know if his host was a good person or not, but he was certainly an amiable merchant.

“Of course. I was extremely tired yesterday. I must have been in a bad mood myself. I truly appreciate your consideration.”

As Yosef chuckled, he filled Sligh’s cup with liquor. It was strong, distilled liquor that seemed extremely flammable. He picked up the cup, and his expression suddenly became serious.

“This must be fate. The merchant who came to ask you to collect taxes must have good reason for doing so. I can only imagine it was God’s guidance that led you to happen upon her at the cathedral. Not to mention that she is an

extremely reputable broker in the wool trade.”

“Huh?”

Col jumped in surprise, Myuri turned to look coolly at him, and Sligh smiled in delight.

“I am the manager of the Debau Company Desarev trading house. You two stand out, so I hear everything if you go asking questions around town.”

Now that he mentioned it, Col understood how easy it was for him to come by that information.

“As a broker, she must have seen every detail of the Church’s oppression. I’m certain she got her hands on the collecting permit for reasons other than making money. I hear she is typically prudent in her trade, so there must be some things she has some strong convictions for.”

Only a merchant could have sniffed out another’s intentions so expertly. Ilenia certainly had reasons to go forward with something she knew was dangerous.

“I knew it must be God’s will that you came to this town.”

Sligh spoke as he brought his cup to his lips, but before drinking, he turned his gaze toward Col.

“By the way, would you really undertake tax collection for us?”

It sounded like a joke, but it felt as though he was serious. The very act itself was a joke.

“Think of it as a drunken request.”

Sligh shrugged and emptied his cup in one gulp. Myuri, who had shied away from the strong taste with a mere sip, stared on with wide eyes.

Their meal continued without incident.

Col had almost all the keys he needed in order to gather his thoughts.

When Col awoke, he had a slight headache. He wondered if he was getting sick, but judging by his parched throat and heartburn, he understood that it was because he had drank liquor he was not used to. He also recalled that after Sligh

parted with them, he wanted to ask Yosef about rumors of the new world, but his drunkenness caused him to collapse on the bed, and he fell asleep.

He felt as though Myuri had been rather annoyed by that, but his memory was fuzzy.

Col propped himself up, and beside him, Myuri was hugging a pillow stuffed with wool and burying her face in it, fast asleep. He was sure she was clinging to a sheep in her dreams, or maybe it was because he reeked of alcohol.

He scratched his head as he thought about it, got up from the bed, and took a sip from the water pitcher.

The light filtering in through the cracks in the window was still faint, but he could already hear the sounds of wagons passing by outside. Opening the window slightly, he could see people here and there on the main street. Some were carrying wool, and they would surely be out performing their work on that stage yet again today.

According to what Sligh had said last night, the Church was being taxed because they had kept an industry so vital to the kingdom under their control.

He could easily tell just how the people's lives had been oppressed by the Church's moneylending by watching how eagerly the townspeople worked. Were that the only story he heard when he came to this town, he would have agreed to help in a heartbeat.

He was only cautious because he learned of the possibility that the kingdom really did not care much for faith and was trying to sever ties with the Church for a different reason.

If it were true that the kingdom was not on the side of righteous faith and was only trying to exclude the Church because they were in the way, then he no longer knew if it was right to work with them. Rather, if they were intentionally trying to abandon the Church, then it would not be strange if the kingdom was even crueler than the Church when it came to faith.

He wondered if he should check in with Hyland. He could think of nothing more foolish than if she were running about without a clue. To work for a kingdom that did not care in the least about faith would be digging their own

graves.

But still, there was something that crossed his mind.

Even if the kingdom was trying to sever ties with the Church for profit, there was little doubt that the people would continue to search for faith.

Not to mention the common-language translation they were working on here in the kingdom. He could not imagine that was something people could simply pick up, so there must be a proper reason for it.

That was because allowing the scripture, which thus far had only been readable by the clergy, to be understood by the masses, enabling them to get closer to God on their own, was such a significant action that it stood on the scale of changing the course of history itself.

The people would be able to feel God nearby, no matter what happened. Even without churches or cathedrals or priests, as long as they had the scripture, the troubled people would no longer rush clergy like him the moment they arrived. If a loved one was sick and confined to bed at home, then their spouse or child only needed to take the scripture in hand.

Along that line of thought, the kingdom could earnestly be working for faith and not a journey to the new world or whatever. Because once the scripture's common-language translation was finished, one could gain God's solace, even if they were alone at the ends of the earth.

"...Huh?"

It was as if a flash of light lit up his mind in that very instant.

A single ship was illuminated in that moment, sailing among coal-like clouds and waves the size of mountains.

Adventurers were on deck, praying.

"...It can't be."

The words unconsciously spilled from his mouth, and he placed his hand over it. Was *that* the reason why they were translating the scripture?

A long, long journey. They did not bring along anyone they did not need, and not everyone was guaranteed a safe return. There would not always be

someone present who could mediate with heaven when a situation arose that only God could handle.

But with a scripture that anyone could read, they could regain their courage and energy...

“No, no.”

He shook his head and erased those thoughts. It was more logical to think of the translation of the scripture as a way for the people of the kingdom to conduct religious activities themselves during a never-ending conflict with the Church. It was just a coincidence that it could also be useful for *that*.

The liquor from last night was causing his thoughts to make giant leaps.

But once he had thought of it, the idea stuck to his mind and would not go away.

“...I really need to stop jumping to conclusions like that.”

He deliberately spoke aloud to admonish himself.

Then he went out to the courtyard to wash his face, and once more, he listened to the troubles of the people in the trading house.

CHAPTER THREE



CHAPTER THREE

After talking with the people in the trading house, Col and Myuri had breakfast and went out to town.

Myuri had wanted to go outside, and Col had also wanted to get all the alcohol from last night out of his system and think things over again with a clear head.

He also had some things he wanted to ask Myuri.

“Do we really want to create our own country that badly?”

At the end of the day, he was having trouble deciding how to treat Ilenia because it was a problem that had very much to do with Myuri.

He wished that a correct faith for God would spread throughout the world, but if Myuri’s happiness was on the line, then he would likely choose Myuri when all was said and done. If he said that out loud to her, her ears and tail would stand up straight and set ablaze unhealthy fantasies, so he never did, but it was how he truly felt.

He was confident that how he prayed for her happiness was on par with that of her father, Lawrence.

“Hmm...”

She gazed off into the distance as she reconsidered the idea, munching on fish bones that she got from a food stall; they had been sprinkled with flour and fried in oil.

“It’d be nice if there was one.”

Myuri’s answer came after a brief moment of hesitation, then she kicked a pebble by her foot and looked at Col.

“But it’s really, really far away, right? So I dunno.”

It was a hollow sentiment for a girl who loved adventure.

“Because even if you come with me, that doesn’t mean everyone I know will come, too, right?”

It sounded like a joke in the beginning, but the second half betrayed her true feelings.

“That makes me sad. It would make me want to go home to Nyohhira.”

There was a time in her life when all she wanted was to leave the village, but that did not make her a wanderer.

He could imagine her being satisfied enough after wandering around the world to her heart’s content, then going home.

But Ilenia’s plans were the complete opposite.

“I sympathize with her. I’d want a place like that.”

She stopped eating and looked down to her feet. It was a weak sight for a girl who was typically never afraid to stand up to anything.

She was a dreamer, but that did not mean she always had her head in the clouds. Rather, she was much more aware of the reality surrounding them and understood how outrageous Ilenia’s plan sounded.

Her reasons for supporting Ilenia’s plans did not seem to be all that simple.

The first reason was that she was attracted by adventure. And she honestly sympathized with her. Or it could be that she felt a sort of kinship with her, and maybe that was the biggest reason.

“So...um, to be honest, I can’t force you, and if you’re worried about me, then don’t think too much about it, okay?”

She looked up, and she seemed a bit embarrassed.

It seemed she felt ashamed that the blood had rushed to her head after hearing the story about the Moon-Hunting Bear.

“It’s waiting for us, and it’s something that even Mother is no match for, right? I hate to admit it, but I guess I should listen to you.”

She was mischievous and always selfish, and Col often found himself sighing, wishing she would quickly grow up, but whenever he caught glimpses of her

mature decisions, he felt a bit sad.

Even he found himself annoyed with how selfish it sounded, but as Myuri started to munch on her snack again, a bit of youth returned to her face.

“Are you surprised by how much I know?”

When she spoke, she tilted her head mischievously.

The gap between this teenage girl’s looks and what was going on inside her head was exceptionally large.

There was a bit of fish bone stuck to the corner of her mouth, and he could not do much else besides give her a tired smile.

“You are a smart girl.”

“I won’t mind if you fall in love with me, you know.”

She narrowed her eyes and defiantly showed him a dauntless smile.

He chuckled and patted her on the head, and she blew a raspberry at him.

“Well, that’s how I feel. I don’t know what Ilenia thinks, though.”

She tossed the last of the fried bone into her mouth, wiped her hands, and jerked her chin to a street corner like a frivolous girl.

“So why not ask her?”

He turned around, and there before him was Ilenia, carrying a bag stuffed with wool under her arm, negotiating with another merchant. Desarev was a big town, but there were only so many places one could carry out trade.

Ilenia and the merchant spoke amicably and at last exchanged a handshake. The merchant fastened a scrap of cloth to the bag with wire and wrote something on it with charcoal. Ilenia must have succeeded in her purchase.

She naturally seemed like a merchant of Desarev as he watched her. She did not seem like a sheep deity, nor did she seem as though she had outrageous dreams.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Ilenia turned on her heel and headed straight for them.

She had been aware of them long before he even noticed her.

“Your work seems to be going well.”

As Col greeted her, Ilenia looked back the way she came, smiling bitterly.

“Not really. He’s a tough one. He always asks for such outrageous prices.”

All skilled merchants would say something like that. Amused, he got straight to the topic at hand.

“By the way, do you mind if we take up some of your time?”

Ilenia’s eyes suddenly glistened.

“Is this about my request to you?”

“Yes.”

Then a troubled smile quickly crossed her face.

“I’d much rather convince you myself. Of course I have time.”

I see, Col thought.

“We might end up standing for a while, so why don’t we go to the market stalls?”

That was not so much out of consideration for himself but for Myuri.

The hungry wolf took the bait quite readily.

And so, the three of them set off for the market together.

As usual, the market was filled with people. Every place that had put out simple tables and chairs for eating and drinking were all full. But when Ilenia called out to the master of one shop, he brought out a chair and table set for them from the back, and Col realized firsthand how great an influence she held as a merchant.

And as he could not start drinking so early in the day, Col went to order warm goat’s milk with honey and ginger—a staple in colder regions—and Ilenia picked out some light fare for them in the market.

“Chestnuts?”

Myuri looked on with intense curiosity at the pile of large, slimy-looking,

shining black chestnuts piled on a leaf before her nose.

“They smell like alcohol.”

“They’re boiled in the local liquor of choice as well as honey. Please try one if you’ve never had one.”

With a bright smile on her face, Myuri quickly reached out and brought one to her mouth.

“Mmm!”

She hummed, her expression full of happiness.

“I’m glad you like them.”

After coaxing Myuri, Ilenia changed the subject.

“And to the topic at hand.”

“I wish to hear your reasons.”

“My reasons?”

When Ilenia tilted her head, she looked the same age as Myuri.

“Why you are so drawn to the land at the end of the sea.”

When they had discussed it on the ship, she did mention things that sounded like reasons.

However, they sounded superficial and not terribly steeped in logic. He had been cautious, likely because throughout all the absurdities of the story, he had not been able to sense her true motives.

It was such a daring story that even Myuri had not carried on with the expected *do it, absolutely do it, do it now*. For Ilenia to be ready for this meant that there must be bigger reasons behind it.

“You seem to be faring quite well in the world now even without going through such lengths.”

It looked as though she had many acquaintances in town, and just like Myuri said, to leave to a far-off land would be to leave all her relationships behind.

Perhaps he had such a hard time swallowing her tale because he had not seen

anything regarding that.

“You mean, I’m getting along well with the townspeople?”

“You might even have many close friends.”

He would give up if she responded, *For the great cause of the nonhumans.*

But Ilenia did not seem to be that much of a heroic type.

“That...may be so...”

Her head drooped slightly in response to his question.

It was not Col that she looked to with big, round, soft eyes but Myuri.

“Myuri, how old are you?”

Upon hearing this, Myuri understood right away what she was trying to ask.

“...My mother is some hundreds of years old, but I’m not.”

She wanted to say that she was as old as she looked, and Ilenia quickly grasped that.

Divine beings lived for a long time.

And they were not human.

“That is essentially the reason why. All my friends, everyone I’ve loved and anyone who has loved me, will be swallowed up by the flow of time. Of course, I am not quite that old enough yet, however.”

She spoke sheepishly, either because she was a girl embarrassed that she was older than she looked, or a nonhuman embarrassed that she was much too young.

Either way, Myuri paused and looked at Ilenia with a sincere gaze.

“And sometimes I hate it so much.”

“...You do?”

Ilenia nodded in response to Col’s question while staring at her hands.

“I take pride in how I’ve built up such a good reputation as a broker. Quite a number of trading firms depend on me.”

He had heard about that, too.

“It might be because I have good judgment since I am a sheep, but I like to think it’s because I honestly and earnestly worked my hardest.”

If that were the case, then her dreams, which put all her hard work on the line, seemed especially odd.

Was there something she did not like about how well her work was going?

He watched her as she carefully chose her words, and she lifted her head.

Rather than strength, her expression showed a certain weakness which made her seem like she was going to cry.

“I am not in this to get rich. I only have to work enough to feed myself. But I end up working more. And I hate it.”

As though trying to cast off something that clung to her, Ilenia shook her head.

The smile she wore when she looked up at him again was incredibly sad.

“I work only so that I may belong to the flock known as merchants. But at the end of the day, I’m alone. While I can distract myself from my loneliness in a group of people, it doesn’t go away. I don’t age, so I have to change my base of operations every once in a while. Emotionally, I’ve set sail for the edge of the sea countless times. I start over from scratch in a land where no one knows me. But...”

Ilenia paused to breathe after the words tumbled out of her mouth, then spoke.

“...a country of our own would be different.”

It sounded like she was confessing her sins. Her gaze dropped lifelessly, and she fell silent, still staring at her hands.

Myuri sat beside him, her eyes brimming with tears as she looked back and forth between Ilenia and Col.

Ilenia was a sheep, and she was meant to live with a flock. To blend in well with the human world and to live happily doing so were two completely

different problems.

Simple words of comfort would only have the opposite effect, and he stood on the side of humans, who represented the majority of this world.

After several moments, he finally spoke up.

“Do you know the story of a sheep named Huskins?”

He was the avatar of a sheep with golden wool who lived in the Winfiel Kingdom and once appeared in the kingdom’s founding myth. This sheep by the name of Huskins snuck onto the land of a great monastery, and by becoming a shepherd himself, he gathered fellow sheep and created a home for them.

Ilenia wiped her eyes, raised her head, and smiled.

“Of course. But our ways of thinking are different. I think what Huskins is doing is a wonderful thing, but there are some words that I just cannot forget.”

She spoke as though she was renouncing her faith.

“Don’t look for a place to run. Find a place you can head toward with hope. Then, no matter what you do, whether it be trade or not, you can live on in strength.”

“ ... ”

“Those were the words of a human, who not only knew what I truly was but also taught me how to broker wool—the merchant I respect the most.”

Col simply stared at her wordlessly because her expression as she spoke was that of such beauty.

Perhaps it was the expression of one in love.

When they were gathering information on her, one merchant had mentioned she was the kind to fall in love with her employer.

She had met a wonderful person.

“People like us are constantly looking for escape in the world of today. We hold our breath, change our form, and give up many things. While I do want to be saved, first and foremost, I want to show our people the possibilities that are completely separate from what Huskins has accomplished.”

Col was overwhelmed by her words. Myuri, too, was shivering slightly, her eyes wide open.

Sitting before them on the other side of the table was a strong sheep, her hooves planted firmly on the ground.

“Of course, I do have some worries and there have been some troubles, and there are very few people like you who will listen to my story. Huskins and I parted on a very sour note. He said, even if the new land really existed, what would you do if the Moon-Hunting Bear was there?”

She glossed over it with a bitter smile, but Col was surprised she had not been crushed after a fellow sheep, not to mention the legendary Huskins, had said such a thing to her.

And he, too, had wondered the same thing.

“...What *do* you plan to do?”

Ilenia responded with confidence.

“I’ll decide when we get there.”

It could be called recklessness. But the legend of the Moon-Hunting Bear happened so long ago, and the reason for the war was still unknown. In a way, her lack of a plan could also be considered a foregone conclusion.

What impressed him was how boldly and without hesitation she spoke. Her lack of a plan was not the result of carelessness. She must have come to such a conclusion after thinking long and hard.

She had a strength unlike those who possessed fangs and claws and feasted on meat.

In that moment, Col felt like he understood why believers were called lambs.

They slowly continue forward, one step after the other, persevering through any storm or hardship.

“So what did you think of my sob story?”

Ilenia suddenly spoke in a friendly tone.

He felt as though he had suddenly woken up from a dream, but he could not

imagine that what she spoke about was entirely nonsense. On the other hand, Ilenia herself knew that her dreams were close to absurdity. Despite that, she was still conflicted over her desire to go forward with it, and he had caught a glimpse of that.

“It would be much too much to ask you to help me in every aspect. So I was hoping you would just help me move forward, even just one step.”

She would press on even if he refused.

It made him feel like he wanted to help.

“Of course, I won’t rush you. You are traveling with your own goals in mind, and getting involved in tax collecting might only get you wrapped up in some bothersome political conflict.”

Ilenia stood from her chair and placed some copper coins on the table.

“I am going back to work. If we keep talking, I might actually make up a story for you.”

She wore a playful smile on her face, but their conversation was surely headed in that direction. She was a strong girl, so perhaps she could not stand the weakness she showed by telling her story.

Col stared off in the direction the strong sheep girl disappeared in and sat still for a while.

He finally snapped back to reality when he was pinched on his cheek.

“Brother, you dummy.”

Myuri was pouting.

“No crushing on her.”

It was not her typical comment on how he looked at women.

Her fingers pinched his cheek lightly perhaps because she truly was worried.

“I am not as soft as you think I am.”

When he said that, her expression quickly reverted to her usual one, which seemed to say, “Sure you aren’t.”

She then leaned over and clung to him, speaking softly.

“I want to help her, even a little bit.”

Don't look for a place to run. Find a place you can head toward with hope.

Col had left Nyohhira because he thought he could change the world and because he believed he could fight against the powerful organization that was the Church. Did he have an absolute plan for victory? Of course not.

Not responding to Myuri, he reached out for the last chestnut.

He popped it in his mouth, where a deep, smoky sweetness spread throughout.

After their conversation with Ilenia, they returned to the trading house, where they found people waiting before the entrance.

At first, Col thought they had come to pray, but they turned out to be sailors working on Yosef's ship.

Their complexions were all pale, but it was hard to discern exactly what they wanted. At the very least, he knew they wanted him at the ship, so he followed.

There, the pier was crowded with people, and not a single person was on deck.

As he wondered what the commotion was about, Yosef spotted them, and he looked like he had finally found his salvation.

“Oh, Sir Col!”

“Mr. Yosef, what's going on?”

Yosef placed a hand to his chest, as though calming his excitement, then pointed to the ship.

“It's Lord Autumn.”

Col gulped. Not just because Autumn had actually showed up but now he also knew why Yosef and the others were so frantic.

They must have been wondering why and how Autumn came here. His awe-inspiring presence rivaled that of the pope himself.

Col felt bad he could not give the details, but Yosef urged him on and he quickly went inside the ship.

It was like heading into a beast's cage, and he was not necessarily wrong.

He opened the door to the captain's quarters, and there was Autumn dressed in rags.

"Do you need something?"

His question came without any sort of pretense or greeting. Col must have imagined how unhappy he looked.

"...Um, I hope you don't mind."

He commented unwittingly. Autumn might have made it safely, but after not being able to find him, he found a familiar ship and asked them to find him.

The entire crew was from the islands, and they most certainly had been stunned.

"Mind what? You are the one who called me."

"That's true..."

There were many assumptions the crew must have made after seeing Autumn suddenly appear, when he should have been in the north, but the man himself did not seem to mind at all.

"It's a miracle of the Black-Mother."

His response seemed slightly annoyed. Since the islanders concentrated their faith onto him, they must have broadly thought most things were solved by those miracles and believed that she was watching over him. Appearances were important.

"I can accept that, but...My apologies, this was something I wanted to speak with you about face-to-face."

"Mm."

It was hard to tell what he was thinking behind the long hair that nearly consumed his head and face.

As he stroked his beard, there came a noise that sounded out of place in the

captain's quarters.

It was Myuri's stomach, and Autumn blinked in surprise.

"Do you plan to eat me?"

"N-no!"

Though she had just eaten some chestnuts, it was almost noon, and they had not been around buying snacks. Not only that, but sitting next to Autumn was a plate of various foods, perhaps given by Yosef and the others out of his consideration.

"Eat as much as you like. I don't mind a bite or two."

Sitting there was fresh bread and several cheeses.

Autumn himself reached out for a piece of bread, so Myuri, after glancing at Col, eagerly took a piece for herself.

"And? I imagine you're here because of the storm the other day, but why have you called me? Do you want me to take you to Rausbourne on my back?"

As Autumn used his fingers to delicately subtract small bites of bread from his piece, Myuri bit straight into hers and responded.

"We met a sheep."

Myuri spoke with her mouth full, and from behind his long bangs, Autumn turned to look at her with his deep, ocean-blue eyes.

"A sheep?"

"She works for a trading firm from a distant southern country and is brokering wool here in the kingdom. We met her, and she is the embodiment of a sheep. We were conversing with her just now."

"Mm."

"Yeah, that's the kind of sheep we met. She said there's a bear at the edge of the sea."

There was another glimmer of a dangerous fire in her red eyes, but it quickly vanished.

“A bear...at the edge of the sea. I see.”

He placed the bread he had just begun to eat back down, and his beard wavered with a sigh.

“Now I can see what she told you. And so you call me.”

“You must know the story. It’s...”

“A new world at the edge of the sea and the Moon-Hunting Bear that guards it. But why would a sheep speak of this?”

“She wants to build a country just for nonhumans in the new world.”

It almost sounded as if it could become reality when they were speaking with Ilenia, but when Col spoke about it with his own mouth and attempted to explain to someone else, he once again heard how ridiculous it sounded.

Autumn’s eyes, too, were the same as when he could not accept the reality of the northern islands and indulged himself in easy ideals. *You are getting carried away in such fantasies again.*

But Autumn closed his eyes and shrugged.

“I, too, have heard rumors from birds that come to the north on their passage. There are those who are eagerly searching the far reaches of the seas. I see, so that was a sheep’s plan.”

A migratory bird resting its wings on a giant whale, floating in the sea, and having a chat.

The image felt like one from a fairy tale, and when Col imagined Ilenia listening to a bird talk about what lay beyond the sea, his heart suddenly clenched.

A sheep could not fly, or swim, or run fast for a long time like a wolf.

And yet, she was taking one step at a time toward her extraordinary vision.

“If the legends are true, however, then the bear will not welcome newcomers. What does she plan to do about that?”

“She said she would decide when she gets there.”

Though it had been terribly convincing when he heard Ilenia say it, her plan

suddenly sounded incredibly stupid when he said it.

Autumn, of course, thought of something and looked at Myuri. There was a silent exchange between them, and in the end, he simply shrugged his shoulders.

“There is not much I can say about the existence of the new land. The passing birds are the same. But as far as I know, I can tell you the sea stretches out to a vast ocean to the west of here, and it is endlessly deep—a barren, lightless world. On the other hand...”

Autumn continued.

“It is true that the Moon-Hunting Bear headed west.”

Myuri held her breath, and Col was shocked.

Could it be that Ilenia’s theory was correct?

“There are clear footprints left at the bottom of the ocean. They were so big it took me a hundred years to realize they were footprints. For a while, I thought it was just how the land was formed.”

Autumn stared off distantly as he spoke. This was not something Col could easily imagine.

Myuri must have been able to, though, since her eyes were wide open as she tightly gripped the bread.

But her excitement did not stem from getting one step closer to exacting her revenge, rather, learning of giant footprints at the bottom of the sea was awakening her sense of adventure; Col was rather relieved.

“I have never seen an animal bigger than myself, but if those were his feet, then I see how it could have ended an era.”

“You...you didn’t follow the footprints?”

Myuri braced herself and pressed him with questions, and Autumn blinked.

He then answered slowly.

“I had no reason to.”

It was a natural answer.

“So you would say no if I asked you to do it now, right?”

She gulped. She was almost about to say it.

“There are several reasons for it, but the biggest is that even I don’t know if I would come back.”

Autumn swam in one night what took them three days on a ship.

And surely, that was not the extent of his strength.

Such a man did not even know if he could return after going.

He sighed because he knew she would not be satisfied until he explained.

“There are currents throughout the ocean. To go west, you must first go south, then ride the strong current that goes west. At that point, there is no need to swim, as the current will carry you.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“The currents are the same as a hill. If you go down, you must come up. Not to mention that even if you wanted to rest, below you is an abyss that drains the light and does not give it back. There is nothing to hold on to. As long as you float, you will drift in the currents. Going forward two steps will only bring you back three, and you will never return home.”

If he said it, then it must be true.

But there was something that struck Col as odd.

“If that is the case, then was the story about a ship that came back from the new world a lie?”

When he asked, Autumn frowned.

“I can’t say that. Because there is a current that flows out from the west to the north of here.”

Myuri tilted her head, but a thought occurred to Col as he looked at the round bread, acting as a plate for the food spread out on it.

If there really was an edge to the sea, then the currents would have to eventually run into it, and if they were to continue...

“It’s going in a circle.”

A majestic current tirelessly going round and round the gigantic lake that was the sea.

If that were the case, then it was impossible to leave and never come back.

“But I don’t know if it’s going in a circle. It may be that in just one small part of the sea, the current is flowing east. There are several places like that, thanks to the landforms at the bottom of the ocean. Are you asking an elder to take on such a dangerous journey?”

He shot down the question Myuri was about to ask before she could.

He closed his mouth, as if realizing he had said too much. When he closed his eyes, it did not seem to be simple silence but rather deep contemplation, and he finally spoke with purpose.

“But humans are not like me. It is possible they could have used the wind.”

“The wind...Technology that would allow a ship to move forward against the wind.”

Autumn was the avatar of a whale, the soul of the faith that supported the northern islands, and he was also the leader of the pirates who controlled trade on the seas.

“Yes. The wind blows without any influence from the currents, and there are some seasons where it will always blow in the same direction. They might be able to return if they use the wind well. Humans have knowledge and technology. They overcame the things we could not accomplish, and they now dominate this world. I could not make a ship like this.”

He gazed about the room as he spoke.

There was honest respect in his eyes.

“Our power is nothing before this technology. The sick and young can simply sleep here and cross the ocean. It is truly a miracle. Prayer is nothing next to this.”

Autumn, the leader of the people of the islands, dressed in his monk clothes, smiled behind his beard.

When Col thought about how crude he looked, Autumn looked off into the distance.

“Technology...Yes, technology. But could it?”

He murmured almost incoherently, and Col noted how his profile looked like a painting he had seen once. It was a painting of a monk who had felt God’s light from beyond his window as he worked. Autumn’s eyes were wide open, just like the monk who had risen from his chair to look out the window.

The man who had gone to such desperate lengths to unify the northern islands spoke at last.

“The sheep is planning to kill the bear. In order to live in the land where it dwells, that is her only option.”

Impossible—the word caught in Col’s throat, and Autumn looked at him.

“Miracles are often close companions of the impossible.”

He then mentioned that human technology itself could bring about miracles.

Ilenia had the power to blend in and live among humans. She had the skill to turn the workings of human society into her own strength. And on top of that, the way she spoke of her dreams.

That must have been where her strange persuasiveness came from.

How confident she was when she stated that they would decide when they got there.

It might have meant that while she did not mind an offering of peace, she was prepared for the alternative.

She was embarrassed by her own weakness as a sheep. She almost seemed as though she was pained by her nature to depend on a flock to live.

But she was not giving in. She had the courage to stand up to something big.

“That being said, it is not logical for a sheep to hunt a bear. You called me in order to receive my counsel, because while you don’t entirely believe it, you cannot ignore it, right?”

That was exactly it.

Autumn gave a slight sigh and looked down at the toes of his crossed legs.

“Even I, one who makes his home in the ocean, would back away from such a grand journey west to the edge of the sea. Especially if it means happening across the bear. I cannot readily recommend you assist her.”

His words were unexpected, and Col studied his face.

“Why don’t you take care of her, as long as she’s on land?”

He had not imagined that Autumn would say such a thing to them. As Col sat, shocked, the expression behind Autumn’s beard hardened.

“She might be at a dead end, like me.”

His hard expression might have been to cover his embarrassment.

He unified the people of the northern islands in a way that chipped away at him.

He himself was aware that it was not sustainable.

Autumn, too, was not human, and though their species were different, he must have considered her a compatriot.

Or perhaps he appreciated the courage it took for her to stand up to a legend.

“Are we finished here? I am tired from swimming all night.”

Though he seemed the sort to have nothing to do with such a simple word as *tired*, Col had no choice but to believe him.

He had heard enough of what he wanted to hear anyway.

“Thank you so much.”

He gave his thanks, and after nudging Myuri, they stood. There must also be a mountain of work to do on the ship to get ready for departure. It would be rude to keep the room to themselves.

“I will be in town for a while. Call for me if you need anything.”

They had a strong ally. He thanked Autumn again and left the captain’s room.

Yosef seemed a bit jealous, but of course, he could not talk about what they had discussed.

He thanked him, too, crossed the pier, and left the harbor.

“What are you going to do, Brother?”

It was not so much a question of what he was going to do but what he wanted to do. In the end, they could not confirm some of the more extreme parts of Ilenia’s story.

What *was* certain was her strength and the fact that there was a limit to how much one could accomplish alone. And it went beyond saying how wonderful it was for someone to lend a hand.

He took a deep breath and returned Myuri’s gaze.

“Right now, I cannot support heading west beyond the sea.”

When he spoke, her face suddenly lit up.

“But...we’re helping Ilenia, right?”

She had stopped calling her a “sheep” and now called her by name.

“At the very least, collecting taxes aligns with my principles.”

Myuri seemed to understand, of course, that was not the only reason.

She happily drew closer to him and intertwined her fingers with his.

“I like that about you.”

When Col only offered a shrug in response to her carefree comment, her grin grew wider.

The world Ilenia spoke of, however, was completely different compared to the one he had envisioned. There might be another reality that he did not want to see waiting for them as they moved forward.

“May God protect us.”

He murmured, and Myuri looked up at him, smiling.

“I’m here with you, so you don’t have to worry.”

“...”

He ended up smiling in return instead of admonishing her.

It was quite impressive how she did not fear God.

Once their conversation with Autumn was over, they went to see Ilenia.

Col had not entirely believed everything she spoke of, such as what she claimed about the kingdom's intentions.

However, he understood that her plan was not just a simple idea, that there was a meticulousness about it. When he imagined her standing up to something so big, even he shivered a little. And he remembered what Autumn had said: *"She might be at a dead end, like me."*

If he could not offer help to those in trouble, then faith was meaningless.

"She said the sign had a ship on it, right?"

Similar businesses clustered together in any city, so by gathering what they heard from the stalls, they had arrived on the inn street. It was chaotic, lively, and full of energy. People passing one another on the street did not look at each other not because they were rude, but because of the possibility that they did not speak the same language or because their thoughts were consumed by preparations they needed to make for the journey ahead.

Either way, there was a unique air about it.

It was like a gathering place for stray cats.

"Found it!"

Myuri pointed to a rusting copper sign featuring a ship that hung from the eaves of a nearby building. The round sign went well with the design of the ship's bow poking out from beneath it.

They opened the door, and the cowbell rung lazily. The tavern was flourishing despite how early it was, and almost every seat was taken. At any other tavern in town, they would all turn their heads to look them up and down, but no one paid them any mind.

They slipped through the gaps between the tables, heading farther in, and they spoke to the owner who was flipping through the account book.

"Ilenia Gisele? Oh, Gisele the Black Sheep, huh? She just came back in. Her room's the one in the back on the third floor."

The owner did not lift his face from the book. Col was startled for a moment when he heard “Black Sheep,” but that hair of hers certainly did remind him of a black sheep. He thought about simply leaving her a message, but things would go much quicker if they could meet in person. He thanked the owner and they headed upstairs. There were several open doors along the hallway, and he could hear the cheerful sounds of chatting and melodies of instruments.

Ilenia’s room was the last at the end of the corridor, and they knew it was hers right away.

Mountains of scrap cloth and balls of wool peeked out from the boxes and sacks piled up beside her door, and there were even sheep horns decorating the top of the doorframe.

“...”

Myuri, who had been sensitive about eating mutton after meeting Ilenia for the first time, stared up at the horns in awe.

“It might be a spell.”

When she leaned forward to knock, the doorknob moved.

“...I’m sorry to bother you again.”

Ilenia stared at them from the other side of the door.

“Can I expect good things from you this time?”

She then showed them a joking smile and opened the door for them.

It was not just Myuri who held her breath at the sight of the room. It was so full of things there was almost no place to step, and nearly all of it was wool and wicker chests that were also packed full of wool.

“I’m sorry it’s so messy. Shall we go outside instead?”

“No, this is all right.”

Col stepped inside and felt as if he had entered a house made entirely of sheep’s wool.

“There are so many different kinds.”

Myuri murmured as she looked around the room, slack-jawed, and Ilenia

smiled happily.

“There is wool from every kind of sheep that is raised in the kingdom.”

Upon closer inspection, there were different colors and all different lengths, and it did not look as though they all came from the same kind of sheep.

As Col stared about absently, he spotted a pile of soft, pitch-black wool in the corner.

Even an amateur like himself could see it had a beautiful sheen and looked very warm.

“This sort is absolutely wonderful.”

He stroked the loose bits that were sticking out, but Myuri suddenly slapped his hand away.

When he stared at her in surprise, she gave him a look.

Ilenia shrank in the corner of the room, as if trying to disappear, her face completely red.

“Oh, this—”

It was *Ilenia's wool*.

“O-oh no, I'm glad you like it...”

She showed a tough smile, cleared her throat, and spoke in a suddenly serious tone.

“It's free anyhow, and I just can't seem to get rid of it.”

“Well, now.”

As Col responded, Myuri sighed loudly, noting that there were some things even he did not understand.

Nothing would get done like this, Col thought to himself as he regained his composure.

“Er, well, we've done some investigating on our own.”

Ilenia stood up straight. He noticed that those beautiful horns had appeared on the sides of her head. When Myuri saw that, her ears and tail appeared.

Perhaps it was like when fellow merchants removed their hats when greeting one another or when nobles removed their gloves in the company of another noble.

“We even heard about you listening to the stories of a passing bird.”

He said that much, and she seemed to immediately know how they tried to gather evidence on her story.

“All things considered...”

Her hair puffed in anticipation.

“Yes. We will help you.”

The moment he said those words, tears fell from her eyes.

When Col realized that, he became flustered, adding on to his response. He did not want her to expect too much.

“But there are still many things I am unsure of. So for now, I’ll just be collecting taxes.”

“No...No. That’s more than enough.”

Ilenia wiped her eyes, lifted her head, and smiled bravely.

“Thank you so much. I think...it was God’s will that I met you two.”

She was not human and did not believe in the God humans spoke of. It was likely just a way for her to show her appreciation, but perhaps there were no other words for her to express it. The way she gripped Myuri’s hands in gratitude with both of her own in did not seem forced.

This was probably the first time they faced Ilenia’s story head-on.

“Okay, Brother, now’s the time to be useful!”

Myuri spoke after a weight had clearly been lifted off her chest.

He could never act as shamefully as he did in the northern islands again.

Once he decided to do something, he had to give it his all.

“So when shall we set off to collect?”

Ilenia hurriedly wiped her eyes and spoke in a mercantile manner.

“Anytime.”

The sooner the better.

Col responded.

“Well then, Miss Ilenia the wool broker, I have one request.”

“Ask away.”

She pulled her chin in, and her fluffy black hair waved softly.

Much like how a person’s words and behavior reflected their personality, the clothes a person wore was, in a way, like a language.

Though Col had no command over the language of merchants or artisans, he had confidence in the realm of faith.

They all stood in Ilenia’s room, and both Myuri and Ilenia wore vague smiles.

“Wow...You look like a grumpy person.”

“How strange. And you just looked like an honest but slightly unreliable young master from a trading company.”

It seemed they were perceiving the very image he wanted to give off.

He wore a coarse coat that Ilenia picked out for him. It was of a rough make, the threads not properly woven together, so the fluffed wool was stiff and itchy, and it hurt his skin. It was heavy and not warm at all. A monk living in the wilderness who believes in self-flagellation and desires rigorous trials of the soul would probably wear something like this.

It was meant to be worn directly over the skin, to endure against the discomfort that might drive him mad, but that was too much.

It was perfect simply worn over his clothes as a coat.

“I think it’s your spirit that doesn’t make you look totally miserable. It’s crazy how much you look like a completely stubborn, reckless young man.”

Myuri, who was not even half his age, gave her critical review as if she knew what she was talking about. Her outfit, by the by, was the complete opposite of his—she wore a soft, warm woolen robe that the color of fresh milk. If she wore her hood up and smiled, she looked like a perfectly noble, submissive, and

obedient nun.

“I’ve heard the minstrels sing of me as the Twilight Cardinal, and I imagine he would wear something like this if such a man really existed.”

It was a familiar field to him, and his imagination looked back on what he knew.

Though he had thought of it as a joke when Sligh first mentioned it to him, judging by how the people in the trading house responded to him, he saw that rumors about him were really standing on their own. And so he would use that impression of himself to the fullest.

“I don’t think we’ll be kicked out with you dressed like that.”

“Whatever the reason, I think it was odd that the father was acting so violent in the first place.”

He spoke vexedly, but Ilenia only smiled. Such a quality made her naturally capable at working as a merchant.

“Well then, shall we go?”

The rumors that would spread if he wore this outfit into town would only cause him problems, so he quickly changed and they set off.

As they spoke along the way, Ilenia mentioned that the tax-collecting permit she possessed had cost fifty gold *lumione*, the world’s most well-known gold coin. A family could live modestly for a month with one gold *lumione*. Ilenia the wool broker should have a great amount of money.

On the other hand, that might have been absolutely no money to the cathedral under normal circumstances. However, it was the third year after their revenue stopped coming in, and since they did not know how long this would last, it was not an amount they could pay so easily.

“Large firms that spend all their time with deals costing huge sums of money could use their political power to collect the taxes. But companies here in town are different. They will without a doubt earn the cathedral’s hate. If you consider that, in the small chance that the Church gains the advantage in their fight with the kingdom, it is not worth the risk. That might be the biggest reason

why tax collection isn't going so well."

"But is it not an inconvenience for—"

He only realized it when he began to speak.

"Right, because I'm an outsider. I only have to worry about until I move to the next base."

Myuri stepped on his foot.

While he thought it would be rude to ask, there was still something he wondered about.

"But every time you move to a new place, do you have to begin your trade anew?"

He had heard Ilenia was a broker fulfilling the requests of a number of trading firms. If that were the case, then when she changed her residence, she had to build up trust from scratch. He could not imagine how much work that would be.

"On the surface, yes, but the one who introduced me to this work knows what I really am. So that is how I get my business."

For nonhumans to live in the human world, they either needed to be blessed with resourcefulness or blessed with a partner who understood them. Ilenia, of course, had resourcefulness, but she had the latter first.

"You met a wonderful person."

When Col said that, Ilenia smiled like a young girl. This smile was probably why Myuri, who would immediately begin to growl before Hyland, did not do the same with Ilenia.

It was just like that of a girl in love.

"Well, I would not be so sure about that."

"Huh?"

"They're the sort to risk literally anything for money, and I'm sure it didn't really matter if I was a sheep or not, because if I were taught how to broker wool, it would just bring in a lot of money."

There were actually merchants like that.

The foolhardy man who married the avatar of a giant wolf named Holo the Wisewolf was a traveling merchant, too.

“Of course, it’s thanks to them that I’ve managed to somehow survive in the human world. It was also with their help that I won the bid for this permit. No amount of thanks would ever be enough. But...”

Ilenia hesitated and gave a troubled smile.

“Lately, whenever we meet, all I hear is complaints about how young I look...”

Money could not buy youth.

Her words made her seem as though she was speaking fondly of a lover.

“One of my dreams is to make so much money that that person can be young again.”

He felt a certain earnestness from her profile. One of the reasons Ilenia must have had to escape the human world was because she dwelled on their eventual parting.

But she decided not to wallow in self-pity and instead chose hope.

They looked up at the cathedral when they reached the bottom of the cape—this would be their first test.

“Let’s go.”

At Ilenia’s enthusiastic call, Col took a great step forward.

Once they reached the top of the long stone staircase, Col changed behind one of the buildings at the empty square.

Looking down at the harbor from the top, they could see many small ships floating offshore from the port. Seabirds swarmed around them, so they must have been fishing ships.

“Do the priests here live in the cathedral?”

He was suddenly curious as Ilenia pulled the rolled parchment from her breast pocket.

“I heard they used to live in beautiful mansions in town, but once the conflict between the kingdom and the Church grew worse, they started to hole themselves up in the cathedral.”

“Because...they felt like they were in danger when they moved about town?”

“That might be it, but they might have been more afraid that the city council would take over the cathedral if they were gone.”

When she said that, he recalled how wrathful the priest looked when he kicked Ilenia out.

He understood that it came from a certain kind of fear, like a wounded beast.

“Does the priest manage the light in the lighthouse, too?”

“There used to be a lightkeeper who did, but now I think so. While religious activities are banned, maintaining the light at the lighthouse isn’t. The critics in town say that by keeping the light burning, they’re praying the pope’s army will come save them from the mainland.”

Such rumors were a relief to those who had been directly persecuted.

“But they probably truly want to make sure that the townspeople don’t get inside, and use the lighthouse fire as an excuse.”

The cathedral doors in any town were always open as a place for people in trouble to search for help.

But now, those doors had been shut tightly in distrust.

“The front entrance must be bolted shut, so let’s go to the back entrance.”

They rounded the cathedral, and there were several seabirds gathered there, perhaps since the building blocked the wind.

They did not fly off as they got closer, but not particularly because the animals understood one another.

“They’re used to people, thanks to the harbor. They attack me sometimes when I eat here.”

As though they understood her explanation, the seabirds gave a shrill cry.

Then they passed under a rusted, grated window, and as they neared the

edge of the point, the back door finally appeared. It was a rustic metal entrance, and there was an observation window on it.

Ilenia stood at the entryway, took a deep breath, then pounded on the metal door with her open palm.

“Father! Father! We are here from the Desarev City Council!”

Her unrestrained loud voice and the sound of her knocking on the door drove all the seabirds away.

She continued to knock and repeated herself.

“Father! By the council, there has been a notice issued under royal decree! If you do not open this door, it will be considered rebellion against the city!”

They were ominous words, but the logic was sound.

And not before long, the observation window slid open.

“Father, as you know, a notice of the collection of tax has been issued by the city council.”

The gray eyes on the other side of the window were filled with the light of hatred.

“And here you are again, did you not learn your lesson? The taxes mean nothing. Since when was the kingdom God’s administrator?”

“I am not here to deprive you of the assets you have collected in heaven. I simply wish to return to the king the coins that bear his image.”

It was a common expression used in loaning and tax collection, and of course, the priest did not waver.

“There is no justice in taxes without just cause, and this is just the same as robbery. God will doubtless punish the king for his hubris.”

“If you think so, then why don’t you try paying taxes once? If that truly is an immoral act, then God would surely show you the truth.”

The priest’s eyes widened and glared at her. Ilenia held the clear advantage when it came to arguing, but there was a metal door between them, and she could not just pry it open and walk away with the money.

“Silence!”

The priest put his hand on the window.

“Wait.”

Col cut in, and the cover to the window stopped. The priest finally realized that there had been other people with Ilenia.

“Wh-what is it?”

For a second, it sounded as if he was going to yell, but when he saw how Col was dressed, it came out a whimper.

According to Sligh, the majority of priests in the kingdom fled to the mainland.

The priest’s face seemed oddly tense, perhaps because he was trying his hardest to bite back the relief of seeing a fellow holy man in enemy land.

Col deliberately wore clothes such as this to emphasize his dignity, as well as rouse the priest’s sense of camaraderie.

“I have heard of what is happening in this town from this Ilenia Gisele. I am Tote Col. I have come to see if there is anything I may be of assistance with.”

The priest’s eyes darted to Col, almost like a flinch, then he looked back to Ilenia.

“This man has come from the port town of Atiph. I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors, Father.”

At that moment, the priest gasped. The stories about Atiph as the starting point for the renewal of the Church must have reached here. It was said that many people from churches and monasteries, who had stockpiled their wealth, were going to Hyland seeking mediation.

If he were guilty, then he was not someone he would want to welcome readily.

“N-no, this is the Twilight Cardinal?”

It sounded as if Col’s other name really was spreading.

Feeling an odd tiredness to that reality, he answered.

“God knows who I am. However, I wish for you to take a look at this.”

He produced from his pocket a letter from Hyland. It was what summoned them to Rausbourne, and it clearly had Hyland’s signature and seal on it.

She always left them very precise letters to use in times like these when something happened.

As he opened the letter for the priest, he spoke.

“After meeting with the hermit Lord Autumn in the northern islands, we were headed toward Rausbourne, but due to the storm, we stopped by here. I believe that there was some meaning in this.”

The priest stared intently at the letter spread before him, and it was unclear if he was listening or not.

Someone who ran a cathedral in the kingdom would absolutely know that Hyland’s name held extraordinary meaning.

“I pray that repose comes to this town as soon as possible. It has been a long three years, and the people’s souls have gone without solace.”

That not only applied to the townspeople but to this priest as well.

Anyone would grow depressed living holed up in the cathedral, fearing that, at any moment, soldiers sent by the council or crazed citizens might rush in.

“How about it? As an outsider to this community, I believe I may be of use to both sides.”

He had not come to set fire to the cathedral. Perhaps that had gotten across to the priest, or maybe, should he refuse someone who looked like a priest who had earned a noble’s favor, he was worried he would lose his credibility.

The priest slowly closed his eyes and stepped back from the window.

There came the sound of metal unlocking.

“Please come in. I have no intentions of chasing away a servant of God.”

The metal door opened.

After a nod, Col entered. As Ilenia tried to enter after Myuri, she was cut off.

She looked at him from behind the priest, but from what he could tell by what he saw yesterday, the priest clearly did not trust her.

“Miss Ilenia, I will listen to what he has to say.”

She was about to say something but nodded obediently instead.

“Very well.”

The priest closed the door and locked it.

The passageway suddenly grew dark, and the smell of mold tickled his nose. He could even see dust dancing about in the sliver of light filtering through the crack in the door.

Myuri, with her keen wolf's nose, sneezed.

“Come this way.”

There were hollows in the stone wall at regular intervals, and there were candelabra with the design of two angles holding up the bobèche, but it looked as though there had not been any candles there for a long time.

The cathedral was so quiet that it almost seemed as if the sound of the birds crying outside could be heard more clearly inside.

“Please, this way. This is the warmest room at this time of day.”

They were brought into a room with a long table. There was a great amount of stained glass used on the wall beside them, and large tapestries of numerous angels hung from the walls; it was too much for a messroom.

Perhaps this is where the priests and owners of the cathedral would manage the place and hold meetings.

Looking at it from a strict perspective, he could say it was luxuriously decorated, but his honest opinion was that it looked abandoned.

“Would you like something to drink? We don't have much...”

“No, thank you.”

The priest, standing under the light filtering through the glass, looked terribly haggard. Autumn, too, had seemed particularly worn-down, but it seemed as though there was nothing to fill out the priest on the inside.

He would not be surprised if he peeled back the priest's clothes to find nothing at all.

“Well, then...”

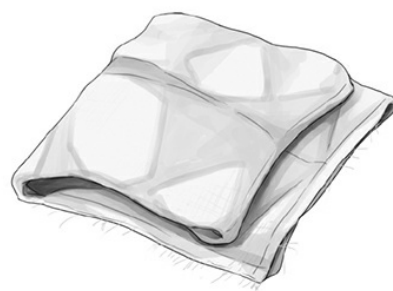
The elderly priest lowered himself into a chair, his hands on his knees.

“What will happen to me—I mean, this cathedral?”

The threatening attitude he had worn before Ilenia was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, the man suddenly covered his face with his hands and began to sob.

CHAPTER FOUR



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Col exchanged glances with Myuri and comforted the priest, who held his face in his hands. Once he finally calmed down, he began to blurt out what was going on, but it was not something Col could so readily believe.

“My name is Habbot. I am not a priest. I am a simple shepherd, charged with looking after sheep on the cathedral’s land.”

When he heard this confession, Col gulped.

“I look exactly like the father, so I stood in for him sometimes. Morning prayer the day after he drank too much or formal events—if there was something where he could put me in his clothes and have it work out somehow, then I would be standing in for him.”

If the color of their eyes and hair were the same, and they were similar in physique, then with just the addition of a beard, they would be almost indistinguishable at a glance. Even if there were times he had to speak, most of the things people with positions such as “priest” had to say were generic. As long as he looked like a priest, no one would question him.

“And now, I’ve been forced to do such an outrageous task...I can’t take it anymore...”

Col sort of understood why Habbot was not going home and staying holed up in here.

He was not the priest—they only looked similar—so of course, he could not go to his home.

And it explained his attitude toward Ilenia yesterday, too.

“So then where has the father gone?”

At Col’s question, Habbot, his hands still covering his face, shook his head.

“He said he would be informing the pope of our sad plight, then left.

Sometimes he sends letters.”

Even Col was not so softhearted as to believe that he actually went to the pope. The real priest had almost certainly left a double so he could lay low and hide.

“I do not think this is right. But if I left, then this place would be empty. And if the people found out that the priest had run away a long time ago, then this cathedral’s reputation would plummet. If everything turns out all right when I’m the only one lying, then...”

It might have been a given for how similar they looked, but the original priest may also have set up Habbot as his double because he saw this honesty of his.

And since he was a former shepherd, there was no doubt he could not have been in a weaker position than this.

“Whether or not you consider it luck, I’ve managed to do well this past year. No one comes to visit the cathedral, and food is delivered regularly by the companies in town because we have a contract. But it all suddenly grew frantic...”

What happened in Atiph might have been the cause. The fight between the kingdom and the Church had been at a standstill at that point but was now moving toward the next stage. The wave was spreading, swallowing up people Col had never imagined it would for reasons he had not even begun to consider.



“It’s been about a month. Whenever the merchants come to deliver the food, they say such horrible things to me. Things like all the Church’s privileges will be torn from the root. You hoarding pigs will be burned at the stake on grounds of heresy. God’s agent, the Twilight Cardinal, will appear and make it all a reality.”

Habbot was hunched over as he talked. The merchants’ nasty remarks were the same as those of someone who spoke badly of the king after he fell from the royal throne. Col did not imagine that the merchants were being serious, but Habbot quietly continued.

“Will I...be burned at the stake?”

The second he saw his expression, he understood why Habbot had welcomed him in. However it turned out, he could no longer stand how uncertain the future was.

He lifted his gaze from Habbot, who had dropped his head, up to the tapestry on the wall. All the angels were gathered around a feast, with serious expressions on their faces. While one might be able to fool others with a lie, to maintain the lie required a different sort of talent.

It was possible to blame Habbot for all this, but Col did not think it was the right thing to do.

He thought calmly. There was also the possibility that Habbot was lying, and the original priest was giving a stellar performance. Myuri’s mother, the wisewolf Holo, had the talent to see through people’s lies, but Myuri was still inexperienced in life, and he could not rely on her.

On top of that, that very girl was looking at Col, her eyes filled with pity for Habbot.

So what was the right answer?

He had learned how to twist his reasoning by studying theology. He was good at answering questions such as *how many angels could dance on the tip of a needle?*

“This is what I think.”

Habbot raised his head, and Myuri stared at Col, worried.

“Only God knows who you are. You may be Habbot the shepherd, or you may not be.”

“I—”

He stopped Habbot with his hand as he was about to argue back and spoke.

“About the taxes.”

Habbot’s eyes widened at the suddenness of it.

“Unable to stand the corrupt practices of the Church, I left on my journey to bring back the true form of faith to the world, but I do not think at all that the Church should not exist. It is absolutely necessary. However, it had gone too far in regards to the wool, and these sins should be atoned for.”

He then began his proposition.

“If you are the father, giving such a thorough performance, then you should understand that by paying the taxes here and now and showing repentance for your malpractice, the townspeople will have a favorable impression of you. Or if you are Habbot the shepherd, who has been placed here against your will by the father, then by paying the taxes in his stead, you will be seen not as a priest but as a friend to the townspeople. And now, this is important...”

He cleared his throat.

“Whichever the case, I understand that by paying taxes, the Church is trying to atone for its sins in the past, and I will put in my good word as such to the townspeople.”

With his mediation and Hyland’s name, the relationship between the town and the Church should not grow any worse.

The old, haggard man dressed as a priest stared at him blankly, then nodded slowly, doubtfully.

Then, as though he finally understood what he was talking about, the light returned to his eyes.

“B-but there’s a problem.”

“A problem?”

“Yes. There is nothing I can pay you. When the father left the cathedral, he emptied the vault.”

That was not hard to believe.

Supposing the man in front of him was the priest, then he must be hiding it somewhere.

Though he said there was no money, however, that did not mean there was nothing he could pay.

“The people will donate great amounts for holy artifacts of the cathedral.”

“Holy...? Ah...that’s...”

“Something that can be exchanged for money, even without money itself.”

The tapestries on the wall, for example, or the furniture. Though he said the priest had taken things when he escaped, it would have been nearly impossible for him to have carried everything out.

“But I don’t know the value of things.”

For this, Col had a response prepared.

“There is a merchant waiting outside. If you are uneasy about the appraisal, then I will take the responsibility of introducing you to a merchant you can trust.”

Habbot did not immediately respond, either because he really was the priest, or perhaps because he was a shepherd, at a loss whether he had the right to make such a judgment.

But either way, he must have realized that this was not something he could get away with by pretending to be ignorant. If it were, Col would not have been invited inside in the first place.

Habbot finally spoke, releasing the breath he had been holding.

“...All right, then.”

“All is God’s will.” Cole responded and rose from his chair.

Col could not say that it was a judgment completely in line with faith, but he knew that this was about as much as he could do. Above all, had Habbot really

been forced into such a difficult situation, then to elucidate the situation would just be backing him into a corner.

In the northern islands, he had seen with his own eyes that carrying out justice did not always lead to justice.

Col thought about all this as they walked down the dim corridor, when Habbot suddenly stopped.

“But may I ask you one thing?”

He turned around to look at him, and there was a dauntlessness about his face, one that really did seem like that of a shepherd.

“Can I really trust that young lady merchant?”

It did not sound like a vain struggle on his deathbed; there was clear emotion about him.

“I’ve heard she does honest trading. She says she is a wool broker, but do you know her personally?”

If he were lying about being a shepherd, then Col would have caught a glimpse of hesitation, but Habbot calmly shook his head.

“No, I don’t. I rarely ever go out to town, and I don’t even shear the sheep myself. I just raise them.”

That was entirely possible.

“But for a wool broker to successfully bid on a collecting permit must mean she is quite capable.”

Habbot sighed, and an expression of defeat appeared on his face.

“You might have already heard from her, but I received her yesterday and ended up being quite rough with her.”

He had certainly yelled at her and physically pushed her out.

“But I want to let you know that it was not without reason.”

“Which means?”

“Yesterday, she came like a traveling pilgrim. Then, before I knew it, I had

invited her inside the nave. I even prayed for her health and good trade on the road.”

Then she had been thrown out of not the back but the front door.

“I think that is what they mean by ‘honeyed words.’”

Habbot then went on to mention how frightened he had been of Ilenia.

“I don’t even remember when the subject of taxes came up. Had she brought the topic up from the start, it was completely beyond me. I should have refused everything. But at some point, she had completely taken the initiative and was pressing me hard. I was just scared. Who on earth was this person?”

Capable merchants excelled in seeing through others’ intentions and getting in their pocket. It would not be odd for those not used to it to think those tricks were magic.

“Please don’t think of this as my retaliation. I just care for the sheep on the cathedral’s land. While I receive my daily bread, I feel how unreasonable this is every day. I think that the Church must have a more proper way of working. And so, let me say this; I don’t think that girl can be trusted.”

Myuri looked disappointed, perhaps because she did not like his criticisms of Ilenia.

Even that aside, Col noticed how odd it was. It was almost like a child’s fairy tale.

At the end of the dark corridor, there was a bit of light filtering through the metal doors. Knocking on that door was a sheep girl, and this was a gathering place for the lambs of God. And there was a shepherd, who doubted if the sheep that asked to be let inside was truly a sheep.

And in the end, a real wolf was right beside them, wearing a woolen robe, volunteering herself as a friend of sheep.

“I, too, have been reminded many times that my own vision is clouded. I will earnestly accept your counsel, Sir Habbot.”

The look on Habbot’s face wondered if his own apprehensions had gotten across to Col, and he lowered his head, then began to walk. It was a time when

faith even toward God frequently wavered. There was certainly a danger in trusting others.

But when he thought about it, the girl walking beside him was special. Whatever happened, he knew he could trust in Myuri.

“?”

Myuri, with her uniquely colored hair of silver flecks mixed into ash, made a curious face from within the milk-colored wool. If the word *pure* could take form, he was certain it would look like this.

He smiled back, then faced forward.

Habbot undid the lock on the metal door, and the corridor was flooded with sunlight and the roar of the sea.

An uneasiness settled over them for a few moments when Habbot and Ilenia came face-to-face. They both had things they wanted to say to the other, but they both knew that aggravating each other would not gain them anything.

Habbot reluctantly allowed Ilenia in, and she did not mention how violent he was yesterday.

Instead, Ilenia immediately turned to Col and asked, “Well, what was the verdict?”

“There is no gold or silver coin. We wish to instead bargain for a payment-in-kind.”

It was certainly just what Ilenia wished for.

“However,” Col continued, “please be fair in your appraisals.”

He could not imagine how much the cloth of Saint Nex might cost, but it might be valued up to fifty gold coins in some circumstances. Relics sometimes cost extraordinary prices. They were, after all, literal treasures of the Church.

“Of course.”

According to what he heard from the trading firms, Ilenia was an honest wool broker. If necessary, they would have Sligh at the Debau Company trading house re-evaluate it for them.

Then Habbot interjected.

“But what will you do? Will you take away fifty gold coins’ worth of tapestries and chairs? We would no longer be able to hold mass if you did that.”

Ilenia responded without any hesitation.

“Then we will take a look at the treasure vault.”

Habbot looked at Col, so he nodded. The old man drooped his shoulders helplessly.

There was a certain standard to the basic structure of churches, and this cathedral was no different. First, there was the altar, and one long aisle extended from it. On either side of the aisle were places for the believers to come pray every day, and long pews were typically used. Hallways sat on either side of these pews. Past either side of the altar was a prayer room. This was typical, and adding different things around it gave each building personality.

Among them, it was common to build the treasure vault behind the altar, between that and the prayer room. That way, it was considered the most holy place in the building. The altar was sometimes built raised off the ground, and the vault in the basement beneath it.

The chapel in Desarev was built in the latter manner, and the door to the treasure vault was at the end of a hallway that led down from beside the altar. There were no windows cut in the walls of the corridor, and it was pitch-black. The beeswax candle Habbot held lit the way, and scenes from the scripture depicted on the walls were faintly visible. He was not using a tallow candle because the smoke would ruin the pictures and fixtures on the stone walls.

Habbot placed the handheld candelabra in a place for it built into the wall and took out a large, rough-looking key. It was so big it barely fit into an adult’s hand, and Myuri looked at it with great interest.

The unique sound it made when inserted into the keyhole only added to the expectation that there was a mountain of gold, shining dully beyond the door.

“This is the treasure vault.”

But what Habbot had brought them to was a plain-looking storage area.

“I believe the items used in worship will be of most value...”

While it was magnificently large, fitting for such a cathedral, the things lined up on the installed shelves were mostly normal, and there was nothing particularly noteworthy. It was not so much a treasure vault than a storage room, and there were even foodstuffs there.

“Not even a mouse can get in here.”

There were firm stone walls on every side.

“You won’t find any gold baptizing plates.”

Habbot called out to Ilenia as she inspected the shelves.

If Habbot were a priest, then he must have hidden everything a long time ago, and if he were a real shepherd, then he must have checked the vault to make sure he would not be accused of robbery in the future.

There were several silver chalices and candelabra for worship, crimson cloth meant to be draped over the altar, gold and silver cord for decoration, and numerous copies of the scripture and prayer books on the shelves.

Col, too, began to look around the shelves after Ilenia, when the hem of Myuri’s clothes caught on something.

It had caught on a fish head made of metal. It was not a size that could be held in one hand, but large enough to be carried with both arms.

“That’s for a festival.”

Myuri’s eyes grew wide at Habbot’s explanation.

“It is quite the extravagant festival. They line firewood all the way from the bottom of the point to the entrance of the cathedral and light it. Then this fish model swims through the fire.”

With all the parts together, it was big enough for someone like Myuri’s size to fit inside. It was apparently somehow held up by metal poles or something of the sort. The festival took place at night, and with good eyesight, one could apparently see the fires burning from the northern islands.

Col imagined the fish swimming in the bright yellow flames of the fire against

the black night sky.

It must have been an incredible sight.

“Is there some sort of legend behind it?”

At the very least, there was no story in the scripture that might act as the basis for it, and Habbot smiled slightly at Col’s question.

“This is a fisherman’s town. They have fried so many fish over the years, anyone would tire of it. It’s in consideration of them, to make sure they go to heaven, too.”

While he understood, he thought that being made to swim in an ocean of fire even after death was rather unfortunate.

“Many people come to see it every year. But we didn’t hold it last year or the year before that.”

Habbot seemed genuinely sad.

Then Ilenia, who had made a lap around the vault, came back.

She looked glum.

“Do you see now that we have nothing here to pay the tax?”

Ilenia responded to Habbot’s exhausted questioning.

“Father, is this really the only vault?”

Habbot did not even look angry at her question.

No matter what excuse he used for such a big cathedral not having fifty gold pieces, it would not add up. However, to say there were no donations or any sort of physical coin because the priest had run off with it would mean he would have to explain that he was a fake.

That was why he did not let Ilenia into the cathedral in the first place.

Habbot’s gaze turned to Col, perhaps because he believed that he was a friend of the Church. His eyes told him that he let him in because he trusted him.

He also had the option of convincing Habbot to confess he was a fake to ease

her mind.

But even Col was not so naive as to simply believe his word that he looked around the vault and there was nothing.

“Father. For now, do you mind if I take a look at the cathedral’s inventory ledgers?”

Such a large organization like the Church had a long history, and there were many people involved. They absolutely had an inventory.

But at her request, Habbot nodded readily. So much so that Col looked on curiously.

“Absolutely. I will gladly let you look if that satisfies you. Please wait a moment.”

Habbot left without even closing the door. It was not so much that there was nothing to steal, but perhaps because if they did try to steal, then he would know right away who the culprit was.

Everything that was sitting here were things that everyone has seen in rituals, that anyone knew just by looking was something that belonged to the cathedral.

“Brother?”

Myuri seemed bewildered. It sounded as though she could tell in her own way that things were not progressing as they should.

“I cannot believe such a big cathedral only has these for assets.”

Ilenia was indignant.

Col agreed. He could not imagine that the priest took off with all the cathedral’s treasures passed down from one generation to the next, as well. He had left behind a double because the priest himself knew he would return here someday. If so, then the true treasures he absolutely could not lose if something happened to them in transport had to remain in the cathedral.

If that were the case, then Ilenia’s goals could be completed without pressuring Habbot.

Even with methods that went a bit against faith.

“Myuri, reveal your ears.”

Upon saying this, Col took the metal pole used to hold up the model fish in the festival. Myuri, who loved adventure and heard many stories from her mother, the wisewolf Holo, knew immediately what he was going to do.

“I’m ready.”

“All right.”

He then tapped the floor with the pole. There was a *thud*, and Myuri shook her head. He then took another few steps and hit the floor again. There was no doubt that there had to be a secret underground room in a big stone building such as this. As long as they had Myuri’s ears, they could find it by listening for the echoes.

Thud, thud—he quickly tapped the ground as he moved about the vault.

He felt as if there was a reason the key to this room was so big and that logistically, a secret room would be made with care.

But ordinary things like food were in this vault, and if they took the time to inspect everything, Habbot would return. As they restlessly tapped the floor, Ilenia spoke.

“If that’s what we’re doing...”

Col turned around when he heard her, and it was already there.

Whoom!

As the floor shuddered and dust fell from the ceiling, Ilenia, her palm flat on the floor, looked up at them.

“...How about this?”

He felt like, for a second, he had caught a glimpse of a giant hoof.

She was the avatar of a sheep, after all.

“Here.”

Myuri, who had stood still, approached a very ordinary-looking shelf. It fit

right up against the wall, and on the shelves were figures of the Holy Mother and boards with images of the saints made from colored glass. There were sliding doors by her feet, and getting on his knees to open them revealed utensils used for dining.

“What is it, Brother?”

Looking up at Myuri, he slid his hand farther inside the shelf.

His hand found something protruding between two chalices, and judging by its shape, he could tell it was some sort of lever.

“I found it.”

It did not move when he pushed it, nor when he pulled it, but when he turned it to the right, there was a loud *ka-thunk*, as if something was falling.

“What was that noise just now? What is going on?”

He could hear Habbot’s perplexed voice coming from the doorway.

“The light stands do not light the feet.”

As Col responded, he stood up, and began to push and pull the shelf.

The shelf was taller than him, and it moved like a door. It made the sound of a gulp, and the air rushed beside him.

Behind the shelf was a hidden staircase.

“S-stairs...?”

Habbot’s surprise did not sound like an act, so he likely had not known about it.

Ilenia looked as though she expected someone who was supposed to be a priest to know about this already, but Col gave her a look and shook his head. Whether Habbot was lying or not, the best course of action was not to ask.

“Father, this may be a sacred place, so do you mind going first?”

However, they had to be insured in the possibility that Habbot was a real priest. If they enthusiastically went down first, they did not want him to close the door on them.

“A-all right...”

He seemed tense, perhaps because his secret was out. Or perhaps because he thought about how he should have refused to stand in for the real priest because of such a secret.

Either way, he took the crest of the Church hanging from his neck into his hand, kissed it, and began down the stairs, holding the candelabra.

The passage was wide enough for an adult to hold out both elbows on either side, and it went straight down.

The air did not smell musty at all, and there was a unique, cool smell that came with cutting out rocks.

The stairs did not continue for very long, and in terms of a normal building, they ended after two floors.

“What is—?”

Habbot inquisitively held up the candle to light the room. The ceiling was low so it felt cramped, and there were several rows of shelves. But the majority of them were empty.

Had he been wrong to assume that since there was a secret door in the vault, then the real treasure was hiding?

“Aahhh!”

All of a sudden, Habbot gave a cry and dropped the candle. Col grew nervous for a moment and began to sweat, but by the light of the candle on its side on the floor, he saw why Habbot had yelled. Right by the bottom of the stairs were suits of armor, hanging on the wall.

It must have truly shocked him, since he placed his back and hands against the wall, keeping himself from collapsing.

Col scooped up the candle and placed it back on the candelabra.

“There are swords, too. Shields...even saddles. What beautiful saddles.”

Beyond the armor were special stands made especially for swords and shelves for hanging shields.

The saddles were placed on a long chest, and when they neared with the light of the candle, the gold embedded in them glinted mysteriously.

“This is not meant for an active army. This is ceremonial armor for some sort of chivalric order.”

Like a merchant, Ilenia assessed the armor. It must have been worth quite a lot.

“Which means this is the treasure vault.”

The other shelves were empty compared to those upstairs, but there was a large plate sitting there, and upon closer inspection, it was an incredible thing.

“It’s a gold platter. The craftsmanship is impeccable...”

He could not imagine how many gold pieces this single plate was worth.

“Are you sure it’s not just plated in gold?”

Ilenia spoke calmly, fished around in her pocket, and produced a copper coin, then lightly tapped the plate. There was a clear, metallic sound he had never heard before, and it echoed for a long time.

“It’s...gold.”

Which meant this was, without a doubt, the place where this cathedral hoarded all its treasures.

But all the shelves were empty, and all that was left were manuscripts that were big enough to cover Myuri like a blanket and a large silver candelabra that split into seven holders, which looked like something a demon might use as a spear.

“This *is* the vault.”

Ilenia, who had walked farther in, pulled out a bundle of parchment from a cabinet with sliding doors.

“They’re proof of permits.”

Which meant that despite the number of shelves, they were all empty, and all that was left were expensive but large items. What did that all mean?

It was not just Ilenia, but Col and Myuri, too, who turned to look at Habbot.

“Father, where are all the valuables that are supposed to be here?”

Habbot trembled in fear at Ilenia’s question, like a criminal driven down into the dungeon.

“I—I don’t know! I only just learned that this place even existed!”

It was valid to think, after judging by the room, that everything that could be picked up had mostly been taken away. The bundle of parchment must have been left because it had the name of the Desarev Cathedral on it.

Ilenia stared at Habbot even more suspiciously, but she returned the parchment back to the shelf in defeat.

“Well, for now, let’s keep looking.”

She did not seem disappointed, likely because she knew that her permit would not entirely go to waste. There was no doubt that if she managed to take the platter home, she could get her money back.

However, their original goal, the cloth of Saint Nex, was nowhere to be found. There was nothing on the shelves, nor was there anything on the floor. They only found a crimson mantle, which they could see by the candlelight. It was a huge piece of fabric, the kind that would hang in the great hall of a king’s castle, and it sat in storage since it could not be easily carried out.

Col wondered if this was Saint Nex’s cloth, but Ilenia shook her head.

“But I wonder how much treasure used to be in here?”

Col murmured absently after a lap around the room. Habbot was terribly frightened, knowing that they must have suspected him of such thievery, but Col added that they were not planning on pressuring him.

But Ilenia spoke frankly.

“There was a long period of time when this cathedral sucked out all the vitality of Desarev. I think this is appropriate.”

It looked as though once the original shelving was not enough, they just kept adding more and more.

Greed was one of the seven deadly sins written about in the scripture.

It was a truth that vexed him more than anything else.

As he sighed in annoyance, Ilenia stood before Habbot and spoke.

“Father. I have successfully bid on a permit of tax collection commissioned by the Desarev City Council, issued under the name of Heir Klevend, and have come to collect your tax. Under the authority of the council and the prince, I will now do so.”

Habbot could not oppose the girl before him. His head drooped as he nodded.

Ilenia immediately began to look for appropriate articles, but Col realized something.

Where was Myuri?

It was hard to see very far as the shelves stood in rows.

Finally, in a place where the candlelight barely reached, he saw her crouched down, shuffling around. The white, fluffy robe she wore made her like a giant mold monster.

“Myuri?”

He called out to her, wondering what sort of tricks she was up to this time, and Myuri glanced back at him, then stood. She then slowly made her way toward him, then wrapped both her arms around his waist in an embrace.

“Wh-what is it?”

Surprised at the sudden move, he then realized that her tail was peeking out from her robe. She soon let go, and there was a dagger in her hand. She had not hugged him but wanted to get ahold of the dagger he typically carried with him.

He watched her move about silently as she crouched down and, without a moment of hesitation, stuck the dagger into the floor.

“Hey, Myuri, what—?”

Before he could finish speaking, she pushed the haft of the dagger like a lever.

Then, with a *ka-klunk*, the stone on the floor moved.

“I knew it. This was the only stone that wasn’t properly in place. It was rattling.”

She stuck the dagger once more into the crack in the stone floor and lifted it up from the same point. The stones covering the floor at their feet were about the same size as Myuri's small feet and were just like bricks.

She then pulled out another, then another, and continued to do so until a wooden door appeared.

"I remember this from Mother and Father's journey."

She grinned.

"You hide the real thing, so you can relax even if someone exposes everything."

He could imagine that stubborn pair doing such a thing.

But he had not imagined there would be yet another hiding spot in an already hidden room.

"Miss Ilenia! Father!"

Col called the two over, and they were both shocked.

"I'm opening it."

Then, after pulling the door open, there was a moldy, dusty, drab cloth covering. He pulled it away, and there were a few shabby wooden boxes.

They were all different sizes, but even the biggest could easily be held with two hands. The smallest could rest on the palm. Myuri must have been expecting a mountain of shimmering gems, so she looked disappointed. Habbot, too, seemed rather relieved that it was not a treasure.

But Ilenia and Col were different.

They were nervous, and there was obvious sweat dripping down his back.

The true holy relics always looked shabby.

"Miss Ilenia, this..."

He called out to her, and she snapped to attention, then drew her face closer to the boxes as though she were about to stick her face into them.

There was faint writing on the boxes, and it could have either been a curse on

the insolent individuals who tried to touch it, or...

Ilenia pulled out a long box from among them.

Myuri immediately sneezed at the smell of mold and dust.

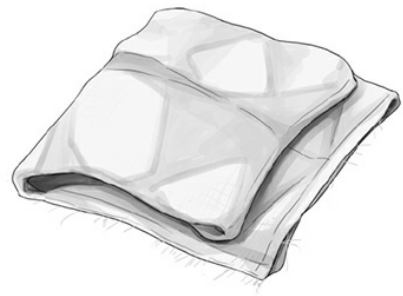
As if she had forgotten to breathe, much less sneeze, Ilenia gingerly opened the lid to the box.

Inside was a white cloth wrapped in parchment.

“Here it is.”

Her quiet voice was the only sound that echoed throughout the vault.

CHAPTER FIVE



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The cloth of Saint Nex looked like a normal piece of fabric.

It was rather thick and a bit hard and quite heavy besides. It was like wool of poor quality that had stiffened.

Besides that, it just looked like a normal piece of cloth, and Col felt a little disappointed. How Habbot so readily agreed when Ilenia announced she would be taking this in place of taxes was likely due to how plain it looked.

“I don’t think that will go for very much in the current market.”

Ilenia told Habbot it was personally important to her.

Habbot knew who Saint Nex was, and perhaps that was why he could not pick out how much it might be worth. Perhaps he thought that the hairs of a more notable saint or a fragment of the famed ark, which could have been in there as well, could fetch much more exorbitant prices.

They carefully put the stone floor back in place and closed the secret entrance. He did not know what Habbot might do with these, but he at least had a night to think about it.

When he saw them off, he still looked absent.

“But it just looks like a regular cloth. Is this really it?”

The wind was a bit strong as they descended along the stone staircase from the point. Just within arm’s distance above them as they staggered along, the seabirds glided through the air overhead. It was as if they were mocking the three who could not fly, and as Myuri sometimes raised her head to growl at them, this assumption seemed likely to be true.

“They say that a relic’s value is in its box and certificate. And I am sure this box is genuine.”

Overcome with relief, Ilenia would have broken into a full smile if she

loosened up any more, and Col nodded.

“I also saw the signature of a monastery I know. Its history was written down, as well.”

“Indeed. But as for questioning whether the cloth is real or not...I think that’s only half right.”

It was only at times such as this that Ilenia’s expression clouded.

“This is the first time I’ve seen cloth like this, but it did not seem like it had been very well respected.”

“Respected?”

It had been properly placed and put away in a box.

That was what Col thought, but Ilenia tilted her head, puzzled.

“There was a cover over the boxes when we opened the wooden door, right? That cloth was the same as this.”

They had put the cloth back over the rest of the relics as it had been when they opened it, but he had not imagined it would be the same kind of cloth.

“Right...I would certainly think of it as regular fabric that way. But what do you mean that half of it is real?”

“I think Myuri’s noticed why, as well.”

Myuri, who had been unproductively staring at the birds, suddenly looked at them in surprise upon hearing her name.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think this cloth is a relic, too?”

Col directed his question at Myuri, and she looked at the box in Ilenia’s arms, then shrugged.

“I dunno. But I do know that it’s weird fabric.”

Col furrowed his brows because he did not think so.

“Weird?”

“Yeah. I have no idea what it’s made of.”

Not knowing what she meant, he looked at Ilenia.

“It does not smell like any animal. Of course, nor like any plant.”

There were several types of fabric. There was animal fur, plant product, then threads produced by insects.

“I have heard a myth of clothes made from the silk of a spider that repented after listening to a saint’s lecture...”

“I don’t know. At any rate, it only smells like the stones in that basement. It is entirely possible that it was once a common sort of fabric a long time ago, but hard to come by nowadays.”

If both the wolf and sheep said so, then it was entirely possible.

While he agreed somewhat that it must be Saint Nex’s cloth, something felt off.

There were stories of water turning into wine by God’s miracles. But wine was wine. It was unlikely that it turned into wine that did not smell or taste of grapes, which he had never seen or heard of in his life.

If there was a miracle of Saint Nex, would it turn into a fabric that was made from an unknown material?

“No matter. As long as I have this box and the certificate, I can sell this to the prince.”

Ilenia smiled a smile he had never seen before and said those words as she had done so a million times already.

“Thank you.”

A sheep girl who had even asked the migrant birds about the world beyond the sea.

They had helped her move forward, and it almost felt as if that was good enough.

“I will repay you.”

“Then may I ask one thing?”

Col was able to ask that because the world had not been very kind to him ever

since he left Nyohhira.

“If you meet someone from the royal family, could you ask them to please think earnestly about the question of faith?”

A legendary bear lived at the edge of the sea, and the avatars of a wolf and a sheep stood before him. But the God written about in the scripture was nowhere to be found.

He could not help but think about how ironic it was when he considered it, but Ilenia stared blankly at him for a different reason.

“...Is that all?”

She then looked at the wooden box she held tightly in her arms.

“This cloth might bring about quite the amount of money, depending on how it would be used. It would not be difficult to make a shiny copper off it without directly selling it.”

“Does earning the good favor of the prince second in line for the throne fall under one of those uses?”

Opportunities such as those rarely if ever came to those born into this world.

Ilenia smiled earnestly.

“Certainly.”

They say she was a broker who did honest trade.

Even if the kingdom was in conflict with the Church for reasons other than faith, that did not mean that faith would completely disappear. If they kept at it, they could possibly bring back their ideal Church.

At the very least, it was more realistic than creating a new country in a land at the end of the sea that no one has ever seen.

“If that’s what you ask, then I have a better idea.”

As those thoughts ran through his head, Ilenia spoke.

“Why don’t you come with me? My cause will become more persuasive, and I believe your goals will be realized, too, Sir Col.”

He was not that surprised, perhaps because it was a foregone conclusion.

“And it would be reassuring to have someone to be the bridge between us and humans.”

He felt a strong gaze on his cheek that came along with Ilenia’s invitation. It was, of course, Myuri.

Her red eyes spoke eloquently—*Stop doing what that blondie is telling you to do and let’s do what Ilenia wants.*

But he needed to remember what Hyland had said.

She said that members of the royal family fought over one another’s rights and were killing each other. He was not as good-natured as to expect that the rest of them were as fervent in their faith as Hyland was.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’ve already decided who I want to serve.”

Ilenia looked disappointed, but when he saw her reaction, he had a different idea.

“Why don’t you come with us, instead?”

“Huh?”

“The one I serve is dedicated to her faith and...might even understand those who are not human.”

Myuri twisted her face when she heard him say that, but Hyland had obviously noticed Myuri’s true form. And when the kingdom sets off on their journey to the edge of the sea, Hyland could, at the very least, come along as well. Through her, they could also get involved in the kingdom’s plans.

That was what he thought, but Ilenia smiled sadly.

“That was the letter you showed at the cathedral, right?”

“Yes.”

“I know the name of Heir Hyland. She is a member of the royal family with a large territory, but she is not a legitimate heir. ‘Heir’ is in name only.”

And on the contrary, Heir Klevend was second in line for the throne.

“And by making the expedition to the new world successful, the prince plans to assume the throne...Or at the very least, I guess that he plans to call himself the king of the new world.”

She meant that since they could not beat her, they should join her instead.

But not every part of this story smoothed out nicely. Ilenia’s plan was missing the answer to a very important question they had to consider.

“King of the new world? Does Heir Klevend understand nonhumans?”

If they were to join the fleet under the prince’s command to go to the new world, then of course, the land would belong to the prince and the kingdom.

Or would they rush farther inland upon landing and create a base there? As he thought about this and that, he realized the expression on Ilenia’s face.

At that moment, he understood that he could never be like Autumn.

“I think...it’ll go well.”

She smiled weakly, and her head was tilted. What he felt from her was not fear. It was probably more accurate to call it a kind of envy.

Ilenia was a sheep. But she was something else in sheep’s clothing.

They were probably planning on hiding a number of nonhumans among the fleet, and either once they reach land or after they defeat the bear, they would rise in revolt. That very option itself was prompt and certain. They did not have the slightest notion of being honest.

Should he not point out how evil that was?

He thought and opened his mouth to speak, but Myuri tugged on his sleeve and stopped him.

“My job is to protect Brother.”

There was no mirth in her deep red eyes.

He remembered Ilenia’s right hand, which had pounded the floor in the vault at the cathedral. Even if Myuri was capable enough to compete with her, she could lose if she protected him at the same time.

“...I am ashamed at how powerless I am.”

When he said that, Ilenia gave a troubled smile, then spoke lightly, brushing it all off.

“If you don’t mind, why don’t we have dinner together tonight? I will send the message to the prince, but that is not enough to satisfy me. I want to thank you properly.”

“Oh no, we don’t need—”

“I will pick out and prepare the finest mutton.”

Ilenia said this calmly.

It was her way of showing she was ready to cross the line.

Different people might see that either as strength or as something to be cautious of.

But she did seem a bit sad.

“Myuri?”

Col called to her with no other choice, and Myuri, stuck between her morals and appetite, returned to reality.

“...Really, Ilenia?”

Gisele the Black Sheep shrugged like a clever merchant.

“Would you faint if I sold very warm wolf fur?”

She spoke casually about always being on edge in the market. A wolf and a sheep had more in common than a wolf and a human did.

Myuri immediately shrugged.

“I’d probably just think it looked warm.”

“It’s the same for me. They look like kin, but we’re very different in the end. But of course, if you told me to eat some, I’d have to prepare myself mentally...”

It was biases, assumptions, customs, even rules or faith that governed people, not logic.

There were times they became burdens, times they were armor, and times they became weapons.

At any rate, Myuri was in a deep place that he could not get to, and Ilenia was going down with her.

“So you really wouldn’t be mad if I had some?”

“Of course not. If I did, then I would not be able to live in this town.”

Ilenia smiled and Myuri did so, too, as the tension in her finally eased.

And there was no way she was not curious about a fellow nonhuman, who they rarely ever met.

“And there’s a lot I want to ask, like about clothes made of sheep wool...”

“Yes, of course.”

Myuri’s face suddenly brightened, and she bounded toward Ilenia. The sight of the two walking side by side, talking, brought Col great relief.

Though Myuri did have old friends back in the village, none of them knew what she really was. There were very few people she could talk openly with about being nonhuman.



While it did not seem to bother her back in the village, that was not the case. Her timid friendliness with Ilenia was proof of that.

Ilenia had big goals, and they might lead down a path that was different than theirs.

But the world was not endlessly big, and they would both live for a very long time.

Were they to become friends, nothing would make him happier than to become her older brother.

“And then, Brother, he...”

He thought he caught a part of their conversation when both Ilenia and Myuri, walking slightly ahead of them, looked back at him, then giggled. All he could do was drop his shoulders and sigh.

The sky was clear and the sun was warm.

May everything in this world be blessed, he prayed.

They had an important engagement with Yosef and Autumn, so they parted with Ilenia at the harbor.

Myuri wondered if she should go with Ilenia, but after a while of deliberation, she decided to go with Col.

It was a complicated feeling—he was happy, but he also felt as though he should not be glad.

“What sort of things did you chat about?”

He asked about their conversation as they walked along the pier, and Myuri replied, baring her sharp canines as she grinned, “It’s a secret.”

He wanted to ask when they might be leaving port, but Yosef was out shopping so he was not around. According to one crew member, it sounded as if they needed a number of repairs since they had been tossed around by the waves, so it would take a bit more time.

If that were the case, then his business with Autumn also changed. Thinking about how he needed to do something to show his thanks, he opened the door

to the captain's quarters, and there was Autumn, sitting still in the middle of the room.

"I'm sorry, were you meditating?"

"No? I don't have my jet tools. I was just sitting."

The man was a giant whale who would live for an eternity, so perhaps his perception of time was different.

"Mm. It looks like it went well."

"Thanks to your support, Lord Autumn."

As he expressed his thanks, his next words were ones of request.

"And I hesitate to cause you any more trouble, but there is a letter I would like for you to deliver."

Autumn stayed silent, and only his eyes moved toward Col. He wordlessly gripped his beard, and that somehow felt like agreement.

"I need you to deliver a letter to a noble named Hyland in Rausbourne."

"If repairs on the ship will take a while, why not take another one?"

That was entirely possible, but there was a reason he wanted Autumn to do this.

"My apologies, but once you deliver the letter, would you be able to bring the response back?"

Autumn stared at him, then sighed.

"How should I meet this noble?"

"There should be a Debau Company trading house. She must be staying there."

"You work me hard."

Autumn's mild complaint was accompanied by a sigh, and Col shrunk. But he would have hated it more if he regretted not doing what he could.

"Thank you."

Autumn only shrugged.

Col then caught the attention of a crew member to borrow writing tools, and he wrote down the questions he had about Heir Klevend. It was not often one could present holy relics to a prince. He had refused Ilenia's offer for now, but if it were better they created a good relationship with him, then it was entirely possible they would stick with Ilenia. It sounded selfish, but they should make good use of the opportunities they had been given.

As he wrote the letter, Myuri poked her head in so close that her cheek was almost stuck to his.

"Hey, Brother, you're not thinking about anything weird, are you?"

She was so close, he could almost tell how many eyelashes she had.

"Weird?"

"Like, are you trying to find excuses to stay with Ilenia?"

It was not so much that she was sharp but rather he had been much too overt about it.

"...Is she not the first friend you've made?"

"Brother, you dummy!"

Myuri gave him a swift head-butt.

"It might not be any of my business, but..."

"It is none of your business!"

She huffed.

"And sure, Ilenia is nice to me, but we're not...friends. I can ask her things I can't ask you, but...that doesn't mean we're close."

His heart ached when she said she could ask her things she could not ask him, but he did not quite understand what she meant. Was that not the epitome of closeness?

"It's different. It's like if you asked someone what they thought of a food that you've never had before. It doesn't mean that you're close, right?"

Now he understood.

“And I think she’s only nice to me because she wants to include me on her ship.”

She grinned when she said that, either because she was trying to hide her disappointment or it was excitement for her adventure.

But he had to tell her one thing.

“No matter what conditions you fulfill, I do not want you to get on that ship.”

Myuri studied him carefully, then gave a troubled smile.

“But would I have any right to go to a country everyone faced danger to create?”

It was possible that Myuri would live longer, interminably longer than himself. Those words would have driven him into a corner had she asked that back at Nyohhira or Atiph.

But now he could answer.

“That is why we’re asking Heir Hyland if we should be working with Miss Ilenia.”

“...”

“If you work your hardest while we’re on land, I don’t think anyone will complain.”

Myuri’s large eyes grew even larger, and she flung herself at him.

“I love you, Brother!”

“I know, I know.”

He had dodged the question in his own way, and once the letter was dry, he borrowed the fur on Myuri’s tail a bit and sealed it.

Autumn wore an exasperated expression, perhaps because he had heard their conversation, but he did not say anything.

He had overheard more shameful conversations of Col’s in the north.

“Depending on the other, I will come back tomorrow either at noon or at night. If she does not give a response, then I will come to let you know.”

“Thank you.”

He took the letter and quickly exited the ship. He, of course, could not just jump from the deck.

“I want to ride on his back, just once.”

Myuri let slip her desires as they watched him off.

“I’ll pass.”

“Yeah, you’ll just slip and fall into the water anyway.”

He could imagine that happening, and it did not make him laugh.

“Well then, why don’t we find some food to bring to our dinner tonight?”

“Meat!!”

Ilenia was supposed to pick out the lamb for them, but that was that.

He warded off Myuri’s pleas for things that were not relevant at the market, and they managed to finish their shopping, then headed back toward the trading house.

The maids stared wide-eyed when they saw how much food they carried, and Sligh, too, who was talking to his subordinate merchants over an account book, rounded his eyes.

“Meat and cheeses to get the taxes from the Church?”

That, of course, seemed like the obvious answer.

“No, that has been safely taken care of, and by some turn of fate, we now have dinner plans with Miss Ilenia.”

Sligh seemed even more surprised and nodded in understanding.

“But even with your help, Sir Col, I’m surprised that greedy priest paid up his fifty gold coins. I’d heard that he hid all their wealth the moment the kingdom confronted the Church.”

From the way he spoke, it sounded as though the townspeople had sort of noticed that Habbot sometimes stood in for the father.

But to explain things in detail would be bad for both Ilenia and Habbot.

“The cathedral certainly felt empty. But we managed to find things of the same value.”

It was possible to make it work at such a big cathedral, just by gathering tapestries, drapes, and candelabra.

In order to trick Sligh, he made it sound like that was exactly what they did.

“By the way, Sir Col, I suppose it will be our turn next?”

There was no harm in asking.

Col only responded with a wry smile.

Just as he was going to return to his room, he asked suddenly.

“Oh, by the way, may I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Have you ever heard of cloth made from something that is not animal, plant, or insect?”

Saint Nex’s cloth certainly existed, but neither Ilenia nor Myuri could tell what it was made of. He wondered if a merchant whose reach extended all over the world would know.

“Oh, that’s easy. It’s metal.”

He suddenly felt embarrassed by his ignorance.

“Thread made from actual silver and gold, and not just plated, you see. The ones woven by incredibly skilled craftsmen are entirely fabric but actually metal. It’s a strange thing. I’m not sure if it can be called fabric, but chain mail and the sort must be similar to it.”

“I see. That’s very informative.”

“Of course.”

Sligh responded with a smile, then returned to the conversation with his subordinates.

As they walked down the corridor and went up the stairs, Col relayed his discovery to Myuri.

“He said it’s made of metal.”

But she tilted her head.

“But it didn’t seem like that. It didn’t seem like gold or silver.”

“It must be a metal we don’t know, then.”

Myuri was not entirely satisfied, though, so she shrugged as she spoke.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t think we’ll run out of things we don’t know if we keep traveling the world.”

As he opened the door and turned around, she grinned at him.

He smiled in defeat.

“Why don’t we ask Mr. Lawrence and Ms. Holo the next time we send them a letter?”

“Mother and Father live in the middle of nowhere, so they probably have no idea.”

Though it had only been a short time since she left Nyohhira, she spoke as though she had seen everything in the world.

When Myuri entered the room, she promptly yawned, then crawled into bed and curled up. She looked ready to sleep for the night, but instead spent her nap clinging to the wool pillow.

Col kept the carefree wolf girl in the corner of his eye as he handled the wave of merchants who rushed him when they heard of his return.

Strangely enough, there seemed to be more people this time, and it turned out that people from neighboring companies had come, too.

They were just on their way to deliver goods, when they had happened to hear about Col, and since they coincidentally had something to talk about, they told him their story—he had heard this pretense so many times, so an acquaintance must have told another acquaintance, then they told another acquaintance.

Though he flinched whenever they called him “Your Eminence,” it truly felt as if they were being sincere, so counseled each and every person as honestly as

he could.

There were so many people, and while he had dealt with them in the hall outside his room first, he realized at some point that he had taken up camp in the loading area, at the front desk with the accounting books put away. There was a long line before him, and one by one they came up to tell him their troubles; he gave his advice, then prayed for them. At some point, someone proudly placed a large wooden crate beside him, and there were those who left him copper, silver, gold coins, and samples of their own product; there were even well-dressed managing staff members from other companies who stripped off their coats to give him.

It was bothersome to reject it all one by one, so he decided to add some to their traveling expenses and donate the rest to the cathedral.

As that was all going on, there came the sound of the bottom of a pot being banged from outside the open door of the loading area. It was the sound of the market closing, essentially the replacement for the church bell. According to town regulations, only specific types of workers were allowed to be working after this hour.

Those in line looked disappointed and instead settled for a handshake before going home.

He was exhausted, but he was sure that only a small number of people who had close ties to the Debau Company had come today.

If this spread throughout the entire town of Desarev, he could not imagine how many people would be seeking reconciliation with God. When he thought about Desarev's surrounding area, then farther out, then the entire country, he shivered at the scale of suffering that plagued this country.

He could only manage some ten people in a day, even if he sat in a chair by himself to talk with them. It could take all day with just one old lady who spoke long and without point. There was no doubt that more troubles would spring forth after only a few had been solved.

People knew how much they could handle by themselves.

They had to reopen the Church or, at the very least, allow the clergy to

perform their religious duties.

When he considered that the only ones who could let that happen were those in power in the kingdom, he felt more and more as if they should not have turned down Ilenia's proposition. Perhaps they should be accompanying her as she used Saint Nex's cloth as leverage to gain Heir Klevend's favor.

He thought about all this as he opened the door to their room, and Myuri was just waking up.

She must have grown hot as she slept since she was wearing a thin slip, and her mouth was wide open in a yawn that showed her back teeth.

"Hah."

She closed her mouth with a satisfied sound, and as the half-naked girl's wolf ears and tail danced about, she opened her eyes.

"I'm hungry!"

"You have quite the appetite for someone who's just woken up."

He was rather impressed.

Not minding his sighs, of course, she slipped off the bed and began to gather the clothes she had scattered about the room and put them on.

"Are you ready, Brother?"

She asked as though it was Col who was not ready, but she was still brushing her hair.

"You don't need to rush. Look, your clothes are inside out. Fasten your straps properly, too."

She removed the shirt she had put on, turned it right side out, then put it back on. She properly tightened the straps on her sides and smoothed out the wrinkles. Perhaps because she had just woken up, her body was damp and hot. It was like her life energy was packed in tight.

"What've you been doing, Brother? Reading and napping?"

She asked as she ran the comb through her hair, and he just responded with a smile.

“Well then, get the food we bought.”

“What’s this?”

“That’s from Mr. Sligh. He said it’s special quality wine.”

Myuri’s eyes sparkled at the small wooden carafe.

“You may not have any.”

“It’s okay, I can just water it down with grape juice.”

“Then you may as well just have straight grape juice.”

“No, I won’t!”

She picked up their bags of food again, and her ears and tail disappeared in a poof.

“By the way, can you even cook? You’re really clumsy, so I don’t think you can.”

They left their room, responding as amiably as possible to the people respectfully greeting them as they passed, and when they finally left the trading house, that was the first thing Myuri said.

He wanted her to respect him a bit more as her elder brother, but there were a great number of townspeople who held him up so high, so perhaps she had a good role as his weight, to make sure he did not float away.

“I can. I sometimes helped Miss Hanna, and I practiced when I decided I would travel.”

Myuri asked because they were going to be making their own dinner at the Silver Bow, where they were headed now.

People typically had food made for them in inns, but it was possible to pay for firewood and make food by oneself.

It was cheaper that way, and one could make anything how they liked, as much as they liked.

“So I can just sit, right?”

It seemed she had not considered the option of helping or standing beside

him to learn how to cook.

But that being said, he could not imagine her making her own food with any sort of energy, so perhaps that was for the best.

“I just felt like I’m being more and more corrupted.”

He said this in self-ridicule, and Myuri just tilted her head and gave him a questioning look.

The town streets were full of people hurrying home, frantically trying to finish the rest of their work, or off to eat dinner at the food stalls.

He imagined the tavern at the Silver Bow would be full, too, but when they arrived, they instead found only a few people there. Apparently, a number of ships departed during the day, and those kept ashore because of the storm were all gone.

It was not that he knew any of them, but the feel of traveling left him a bit sentimental, since the people who were there yesterday were gone today, and tomorrow yet again new people would come.

They told the innkeeper that they were friends of Ilenia’s, ordered drinks, then set up at a table in the corner. It would have been easier to meet if the church bells were working, but they decided to meet at the vague time that was after the market closed and the sun was setting.

“Can I just have some cheese?”

Myuri glanced inside the cloth bag they set on the table.

The streets outside finally grew dark, and once the torches outside were lit, the traveling merchants who had stayed out as late as possible returned, and the quiet tavern grew lively.

People were raising their voices in cheers, and food was rushing out from the kitchen.

Myuri was glaring at him reproachfully, tapping her knees impatiently.

“She must be doing her regular work, and that’s making her late.”

Col pulled out the dried meat and cheese and added just a bit of wine to her

grape juice. But they kept waiting, and Ilenia did not appear. Nearby patrons were glancing at them suspiciously.

“Shall we go check on her?”

Perhaps she was sleeping as Myuri often did.

It was possible that once she obtained the saint’s cloth she had always wanted, all her tension vanished.

“I’ll do it!”

Myuri could not stand sitting still, so she stood before she finished speaking and ran off toward the stairs. As he gazed in the direction she disappeared in, one of the muscular sailors carousing at the table beside theirs studied him.

Then, when their eyes met, the man looked meaningfully in the direction Myuri went.

“Inn guests, huh? I don’t think I’ve seen you around, though.”

“No...We had plans to have dinner with an acquaintance staying here.”

He responded, then continued.

“In celebration of a successful deal.”

Col was now dressed as a merchant. The sailor squinted, scrunched his nose, then leaned over to him and held up his tankard.

“That’s fantastic.”

Col lifted his own tankard to his. He did not seem like a bad person.

“But who? I’ve been here a while, too. I’ve got a good grasp on what most people are up to. If you’re gonna look for ’em, I’ll tell you what I know.”

The sailor, who had now completely turned to face his table, spoke as he stroked the stiff hairs on his arm.

“A wool broker named Gisele the Black Sheep.”

He said the name the innkeeper had used, and the sailor looked at him in astonishment.

“Gisele? The one at the back of the second floor?”

He recalled the overflowing cargo and the skull above the door.

The sailor threw back his tankard and gulped it down.

“Hmm...that’s weird...That was definitely for Gisele.”

He then turned back to his own table.

“Oy, lads, there were people coming and going during the day today, yeah?”

“Huh?”

Their conversation began. As he wondered what was going on, the ceiling above him shook.

It shivered with such force he could see the sound when he saw feet at the stairs, then her body, then Myuri.

Her face was tense.

Her eyes were red.

“I knew it. That Gisele said she was off to travel and was gathering her stuff.”

“Huh?”

Myuri stood behind Col, her shoulders drawn up.

“Ilenia’s gone.”

Her face was pale, and her eyes were a deep red.

“Maybe a trade deal is taking a long—”

“Her door was unlocked, and those boxes were gone, and so was all the nice-looking wool.”

She cut him off and spoke conclusively.

There was an emotion she was desperately holding back that was baring its fangs deep in her unblinking eyes.

“What’s up, did you lend that Black Sheep some money?”

The sailor looked back and forth between them.

There was one question that came to mind immediately.

“Was it Miss Ilenia who was gathering her things?”

The word that she was gathering her things to go on a journey scratched at him like sand mixed into bread. With a tax collection permit worth fifty gold coins, she had gotten her hands on the cloth of Saint Nex, kept in a secret closet, which was in a secret room in the cathedral's vault.

Though she said it generally would not have much value, it had been kept with a bit of hair from a famous saint that even children knew of and a fragment of the legendary ark that appears in the scripture. He could not imagine how much gold it was actually worth.

Had she been robbed?

And then it occurred to him.

Who on earth had noticed she had gotten her hands on a treasure?

"No, it wasn't the girl herself, but they said she'd asked them to gather her things."

In a place such as this, where people who lived on the road gathered, no one would pay mind to something like that. For inns, it was typical that new people came every day and left suddenly.

But could it be anything other than robbery?

"Let us go check again."

Col rose from his chair.

"Do you mind if we use that?"

The other sailors pointed to their table, and Col responded, handing over the bag of food.

"Take this, too."

The eyes of the drunken sailors were immediately clear when they saw the bag. When Col and Myuri left the table, they could hear cheers of joy behind them.

Following the impatient Myuri's lead, they went up to the second floor and traveled farther down the hall.

The liveliness of the tavern downstairs made it seem even quieter.

“Can you sniff out who’s been coming and going?”

She had a wolf’s nose.

But she shook her head.

“Does it seem like there’s been a fight? Like...the smell of blood?”

While he wished such a thing had not happened, he had to be sure.

As Myuri placed her hand on the door, she shook her head again.

“Nothing. I think she was tricked and led out.”

If there was no sign of struggle, then that was possible. When she opened the door, the light shining through the gaps in the window faintly illuminated the outlines in the room.

“You said the boxes are gone, right?”

“Yeah. And all the good-quality wool is gone, too.”

As his eyes grew used to the darkness, sure enough, everything that made the room feel small was gone.

“Could you follow Miss Ilenia’s scent?”

Just as he asked, Myuri took a deep breath then exhaled.

“I...don’t think so. Everything smells like sheep in this town. Even when I go downstairs, I lose track of everything.”

That meant there were only so many things they could do. They could either ask around on the street or make guesses.

The fact that she carried the cloth of a saint would only make asking questions even trickier.

“Brother, Ilenia...”

Myuri said, and she looked ready to burst into restless tears.

She had said that Ilenia was only nice to her because she wanted to include her in her party, but to Myuri, a fellow nonhuman was a big deal.

He only needed to remember Habbot’s face when he visited the cathedral, dressed as a priest. It was a happy thing to meet someone who lived under

similar circumstances as oneself, even if they were strangers, or even if they were hostile.

And unlike Autumn, Ilenia looked like a girl and was not as old as Holo. Of course the friendly Myuri would quickly let down her guard around her.

But they would gain nothing by panicking, and more importantly, he did not want to see a sad face on Myuri.

“It’s all right. Calm down now.”

He pulled her into a hug, and she hugged back even tighter.

As he patted her small back three times, he moved his head.

“Well, we can’t move forward by standing here.”

He offered words of comfort as he let go, and Myuri smiled at him bravely.

“Myuri, can you tell where she put the odd fabric?”

As she wiped the corners of her eyes, she immediately stooped down and entered the room.

Her ears and tail sometimes shone dully as the light grew brighter and dimmer.

“Here...maybe. It smells like mold.”

She found a wooden box with a lock at the back of the room. It was reinforced with metal and big enough to fit two of Myuri.

“It’s unlocked, and...it’s empty.”

Such a big box would typically hold a variety of different things. Myuri poked her head inside and sniffed around.

“It smells like money, and sheepskin...Oh, Brother, I think this stuff might’ve been inside.”

She reached down the side of the box, and from a gap between other boxes, she pulled out a sheet of parchment.

She neared the window, held it up to the light filtering through, and saw words.

“It’s a contract. Then it’s possible she kept valuables in this box.”

And all of it was gone.

Was this a coincidence? Like Habbot said, a wool broker bidding on a tax collection permit was enough to stand out on its own. Fifty gold *lumione* for a permit was not cheap.

It was not entirely impossible that she had been targeted a while back and was only now being attacked.

If there was no struggle, then Myuri’s suggestion was perfectly valid: She had been tricked and led away, then her room was searched while she was gone.

But if it was not a coincidence?

“If the reason her room was searched was because of that cloth...”

The list of suspects naturally shrunk.

“I cannot imagine anyone besides Mr. Habbot.”

“Then—”

Myuri’s tail puffed up with so much energy it was almost loud, and she started to run off.

“But then why are we safe?”

Col looked at Myuri, and she looked back at him blankly.

“According to Mr. Sligh, there are spies from the Church in town. It would be appropriate to think that it was them who took her away. If that were the case, then we should be apprehended, too.”

“...They might think we’re just random passersby that she used.”

“And yet, we did help her. There must be some kind of behavior for this...Did you notice anyone looking at us like that?”

Myuri dropped her head, even her shoulders, and looked away uncomfortably.

“...No...”

“Which then means we were not necessarily being watched.”

Myuri was not a stupid girl.

“And that’s right. If Mr. Habbot really had sent out orders, then there’s the problem of communication.”

“Communication?”

“The cathedral is at the top of the cape. Anyone walking on the cape stands out, and having said that, if spies really are in the city, then how did he let them know that a treasure had been taken away?”

Myuri looked off distantly and tilted her head.

“Or it is possible that someone else was in the cathedral.”

But that did not seem likely, either, judging by Myuri’s response. More importantly, since her house had been searched while the sun was up, Habbot himself would have had to go into town during the day, or the spies would have had to go to the cathedral.

They needed to confirm this, but it was hard to imagine.

“Then where did Ilenia go? Who took her stuff?”

Myuri was getting impatient.

She must have thought they were wasting precious time, but there was no point in both of them panicking. Myuri had saved him with how calm she was in the northern islands. Now it was his turn.

As he wondered what they should do, he noticed the parchment in his hand.

“Miss Ilenia said she belonged to a trading firm from the south. If that’s so, then she surely has someone to depend on in her time of need.”

In the northern islands, that was the church the merchants built at their own expense. No one could know what would happen in a distant land, nor was it certain that local people in power would help. Though people were weak all by themselves, that was not the case in a group. Not to mention that Ilenia, as a sheep, should know how important that was.

Her company would be of much more help than himself and Myuri simply worrying about her.

“But where should we go?”

“Seek and you shall receive.”

They only needed to ask.

“I’ll ask the people downstairs.”

Col hurriedly stopped Myuri as she was about to rush out.

“Even though they don’t know what company she belongs to?”

He looked at the parchment in his hand, disregarding Myuri as she stopped in her tracks. It was dark and he could not see the writing very well, so he opened the window and brought in the light. The sleepy, pale pink of the fire lit the page in his hands.

It looked like a note about the wool trade, and going down the page there were signatures and seals of Desarev’s notaries, then merchant statements, then finally, Ilenia’s signature. Her writing was clean, fitting for the intelligent air about her, but when he saw what was written beside it, he gulped.

There was the name of a company that even he knew.

“Brother, what’s wrong?”

Myuri had noticed how he was acting and drew closer. The world was big yet felt so small; large companies had clients all over, like lattices in a net, so it was not unusual to run across them in the wild. Yet, he felt as if he was on the verge of gaining some sort of meaning from this. Things in his head were beginning to connect.

And it was not something that gave him a very positive hunch.

But what was it?

As he stared intently at the signature on the parchment, he suddenly heard a shrill sound coming from outside.

“...A whistle? Have they arrested someone?”

It might be the whistles of those who kept the peace within the walls. It was port town, a gathering place for hot-blooded sailors, so there were fights and the sort all the time. Yet, Col could not wipe away his feelings of unease, and

when he went to peek out the window, Myuri pushed him down.

“M-Myuri?”

He looked at her in surprise, and she was not looking down at the city below but at the sky.

“Here!”

Just after she waved, a star fell from the sky.

“Ahh!”

Something passed before his face with great speed and the force knocked him back, but the wool left in the room saved him. He blinked in confusion, and there in the center of the room, his eyes met with a large bird.

Myuri, undaunted, walked closer to it and softly pet its big beak.

“It was far, wasn’t it? Thanks.”

The large bird puffed itself up even bigger and flapped its wings a couple of times, as though sighing.

“Myuri, who is this bird?”

“There’s a letter.”

She untied the letter attached to its leg and handed it to Col. That meant the bird must be a messenger from Rausbourne. He only spent a few moments in shock before he quickly opened the letter. There was no signature, but he could quickly tell by the writing that it was from Hyland.

He looked at the bird not because he was checking if it could understand human speech.

For a letter to be delivered this way meant that the contents were urgent.

“What does it say?”

“‘I heard from my messenger about your activities in the northern islands. I thank you. Now, about the *second man*, do not ask for his faith. This man will use any methods necessary to gain power.’”

If Hyland was so overtly criticizing him, then he was much worse than Col

thought.

“I am also aware of the rumors shared among a small number of merchants. But please think of it as idle gossip. More importantly, now is not the time for the second man to be hooked on such fantasies. He is taking advantage of this storm and aiming for the first. He is likely not worried about what will become of our family. Please think of his attempts to open the vaults across the kingdom as his way of gaining funds.”

Hyland’s calm yet powerful strokes caused the hand holding the letter to sweat.

There was no talk of dreams or anything.

Heir Klevend saw the fight with the Church as his opportunity to steal the throne. Hyland was saying that he was forcing money from the Church for that very reason and allowing the civil strife to continue.

“If he is gathering holy relics, then that is not for he himself to pray, but—”

To make others pray.

Faith was the pillar of the heart that people relied on in times of trouble.

If so, then when was it in life that people needed it the most?

When their lives were in danger. When they engaged in war.

“Those supporting the second man are only those currying favor with him for when he becomes the first. There is nothing but greed there. I summoned you so that you may become acquainted with the first man...”

When he finished reading, he heard the bird pecking at his own feet.

“Then that means Ilenia’s been tricked?”

Myuri seemed bewildered. That was the apparent conclusion in Hyland’s letter.

Or perhaps, they could also conclude that Ilenia had simply read too much into it on her own.

But the hand that held the letter still sweated not because of that but for an entirely different reason.

His heart beat so loudly, it pained his chest.

A plot to steal the throne by the one second in line for it. He was collecting money from the weakened churches throughout the kingdom for that purpose, allowing the strife to continue.

On the other hand, those supporting the prince were those hoping for compensation once he became king, expecting to be granted privileges or, in some cases, be appointed as nobility.

If that were so, then he could easily explain Ilenia's action.

That was because...

"Myuri."

"...What?"

It was not her typically flippant response.

Her wolf ears and tail were tensed in nervousness.

Her expression matched.

He really wanted it to be his own misunderstanding. But he had learned in the northern islands how dangerous it was to only see the world the way he wanted to see it.

And that it was painful for people to change the way they think.

"Miss Ilenia might not have been tricked."

"...Brother?"

When Myuri asked back in confusion, he had no choice but to respond as such: "Miss Ilenia might have tricked us."

Her ears and tail stood on edge.

"Brother..."

"Listen, Myuri."

Not budging, he showed her the contract Ilenia had dropped beside the wooden box.

"Written on here is the name of the trading firm that Miss Ilenia belongs to. It

is called the Bolan Company. I know the merchant who founded this company, and she sent her congratulations both when Spice and Wolf was completed and when you were born.”

Myuri only stared blankly when she heard that, perhaps confused at the gap between her urgency and how calm he looked. “Th-thank...you?” she mumbled.

But if Ilenia was someone from the Bolan Company, then the answer was simple.

They knew that the company owner was aware of what Ilenia truly was, and they knew that Ilenia looked up to the owner. The owner, Eve Bolan, was a true-to-life miser, but she was not a bad person.

However, Eve Bolan had a past. She was a fallen Winfiel noble, and her husband, who had bought out her family name, went bankrupt in the wool trade. She was a heroic woman who then became a merchant on her own, crossing dangerous bridges with a straight face, and established her own trading company in the south. When Col met her when he was a child, she had the air of a wolf about her, but had always been somewhat kind.

When a merchant in town said she was the sort to fall in love with her employer, it may have not been necessarily wrong.

If Ilenia was doing business for Eve, then she could have only one goal.

“Essentially, Miss Ilenia may be trying to get Miss Eve’s title back for her.”

That was easier to understand. It was much more believable than making a new country on a land that may or may not exist at the end of the sea.

Her listening to what a migrant bird had to say was likely not a show of how serious she was, but more understandable as simply curiosity from a merchant who took part in long-distance trade. It was an obvious decision to deliberately ask a migrant bird since Ilenia was the embodiment of a sheep, and birds knew things that people did not.

It was entirely his own imagination that he looked at her and saw desperation and a girl’s courage.

Had Habbot also not warned him?

Ilenia was not just a girl. By the time he realized it, she had taken the initiative in the conversation and slipped him into her pocket.

Had she been trying to think of a way to use them the moment she woke up on the ship, learned about Myuri and how close the two were, then it was not difficult to think up a rumor.

And the most effective time to tell a lie was to creep into the temple of truth and speak about the world the other wanted to see. As a result, their biases and preconceptions clouded their vision.

Who was the one who said that sheep were more honest than foxes?

The supreme ruler of the forest, around whom one could not drop their guard—a wolf.

“Miss Ilenia...”

It was difficult to continue, but he had to say it.

“...tricked us.”

Along that line of thought, everything was easily explained. She would make off with the saint’s cloth, sell off the good-quality wool through others, then with money in hand, cover her tracks. She must have thought that if they discovered she lied, things would not end well for her before Myuri’s fangs and claws, and so she had no more use for this town.

It sounded like she typically went around to various towns. Though she had lost her base here, it was not something that brought her too much trouble, and that was perhaps why she lived in inns.

“B-but...”

Of course, Myuri tried to protest. She was a tomboy, loved pranks, and it was frightening how intelligent she was; there were times her sharp judgment reminded him of a sage. Not only that, she was also the sort of girl who constantly abused her elder brother, but she was truly very much her age—courageous and kind.

This must be the first time in her life she had been betrayed.

“Myuri.”

He called her name and reached out to her shoulder.

She smacked it away.

“No, no, Ilenia wouldn’t trick us.”

He knew she did not want to believe it. She must have thought they could have been friends.

Or perhaps her heart had been stolen away by the dream of a country all for themselves.

A place all for them, where they did not have to hide, one they could place proudly on the world map.

“But Miss Ilenia is a sheep. Even if she was attacked, she could run away if it came down to it. It might be that she did not because she left on her own will?”

It was painful, but they had to accept it.

He knew it was not easy to overturn first impressions. After all, Col always thought of Myuri as his little sister, and she could not call him by anything other than “Brother.”

But the world was not made convenient for them.

“Myuri...”

Hesitating, he reached out to Myuri, who had suddenly bent over and begun sobbing.

She did not push back this time.

He pulled Myuri’s small body into a hug, and his gaze suddenly turned to the large bird in the room.

He gave it an apologetic look, and the bird turned its head left and right two, three times, then flew off from the window in defeat.

Though for a moment, he wondered if he should ask the bird to look for Ilenia from the sky, but it might have been better they did not find her. If they found one another again in a bad manner, then Myuri might stick to Ilenia and the entire situation would just grow more complicated.

Things like this happened when one left their comfortable home. He

tightened his arms around her, to at least make sure her heart did not fall to pieces.

That was when he noticed footsteps coming down the corridor.

This was Ilenia's room; it would certainly garner some suspicion if they stayed too long. It was just when he was about to prompt Myuri that they should leave the room— "Sir Col?"

He could hear someone calling for him on the other side of the door.

He was startled, but the voice continued.

"I have been told to call on you urgently by Sir Sligh."

Myuri lifted her tearstained face, and their eyes met.

"Hello?"

He had told Sligh that they were going to the Silver Bow, and those cheerful sailors must have told him about them if he asked in the tavern.

"Yes. Please wait a moment."

Col looked at Myuri.

"Are you all right?"

Instead of responding, she stubbornly pressed her face against his chest and rubbed against it.

That must have meant she was okay.

"Good girl."

He patted her head, and with a frown, she put away her ears and tail.

"Mr. Sligh called me?"

Col opened the door, and standing there was a merchant of about the same age as himself.

"Yes. There is a bit of...No, a very big problem. I was told to call on you at once."

The young merchant looked around the corridor, then spoke in a hushed voice.

“Ilenia Gisele has been arrested by the city council.”

“Wha—?”

The merchant stared intently at him.

“She’s been charged with theft. They say she stole a number of treasures from the cathedral.”

His consciousness was consumed with a sensation of reeling back a few steps.

Though he was rather happy his prediction was wrong, the situation was growing worse.

“Th-that is a false accusation. The treasure vault was already empty. I can personally vouch that she only took things that were worth the collection permit.”

Though it was still possible she had told them about her nonexistent dreams in order to use them, he could not believe that the emptiness of the vault was Ilenia’s doing.

“Of course, the council is in an uproar since they believe you were her accomplice.”

The path on the cape stood out, and there were beggars around the foot. It was only natural that he would fall under the point of suspicion as well. But the one he should be explaining himself to was not the merchant before him.

“I should go to explain, correct?”

“Yes. Sir Sligh will, of course, attend as a witness. Please don’t worry.”

Ilenia’s goals and this were two completely different things.

Habbot must have decided that, in order to defend himself, he needed to explain what happened to the lost treasures. Though it was easy to pressure him, it was recklessness that could have been prevented if they had only listened more kindly to what he had to say.

“I will take you there.”

The merchant spoke, then quickly walked away. Before Col followed him, he looked at Myuri and took her hand.

“It’s all right. God favors the righteous.”

Myuri’s hand stopped just as she was about to grab his, and she looked at him.

“Of course, so do I.”

Her small hand gripped his tightly.

It was growing late, and the ports in Desarev were covered in a weary, deep darkness.

There were those here and there who were past the stage of yelling in drunkenness and were now sleeping at the tables and repeating the same conversations over and over.

They rushed out among these people and headed toward the cathedral with cool heads.

The town was outlined in red firelight, and beyond the smoldering embers of the harbor, they could faintly see the cathedral.

Though they could see the light from the lighthouse, the cathedral was dead silent.

As the three jogged through the town, Col asked the Debau merchant about the situation.

“It was after noon that the father contacted the city council. He said he had welcomed in a wool broker who had come to collect tax, but when he realized it, many of the valuables were gone.”

“And the council believed that?”

“It was the council that put the collection permits in the prince’s stead up for auction, after all...It is inevitable that there will be trouble over the collection of tax, but they can’t ignore a report that someone has stolen from the father at the cathedral.”

Habbot must have felt that much run down. From what little they spoke of together, he did not seem the sort to set someone up in self-defense.

No, that might just be his own assumptions. It was possible that Habbot was

not there in the first place, and he would believe it if that were a priest putting on a show.

“And Miss Ilenia is in the cathedral?”

“Yes. The father and the important people from the council are there, too.”

They must be in the middle of an endless dispute.

“So the ones who were taking her things out of her room were council members gathering evidence?”

If that were true, then he could understand why Ilenia did not fight back, nor could they explain the truth to the other patrons at the inn.

The merchant looked back at Col and nodded slowly.

“God will make it clear for us all.”

He then looked forward again and continued to jog. The beggars were at the foot of the cape, as usual, and they stared after them as they rushed up the stone steps.

It was harder to see as they went up the dark stone steps than he thought, and not knowing where the cliff was frightened him. Just one step off the steps might result in him falling into the ocean, and the long path ahead of them made him feel small.

Of course, the path was not actually that narrow. The wind was stronger than it had been during the day, but the view of the town was beautiful at night, like scattered embers.

When they came to the square in front of the cathedral, it was empty and silent. Stories would spread throughout town if they dispatched soldiers and lit torches.

Following the merchant’s guidance, they went around to the service entrance, and there was an errand boy keeping watch. He was huddled over from the cold, but when he noticed them, he stood up straight, and with an affected movement, he knocked on the door.

The observation window slid open immediately, and when Col thought he saw a pair of eyes looking through it, the metal door opened.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

The man wore a striped shirt over his potbelly. His sash drooped low on his right side, and a feather decorated his chest.

He was the typical sort of town leader, and he must have been a former merchant or president of an affluent artisans’ association.

“I am Theore of the city council.”

“I am Tote Col.”

Theore shook Col’s hand, then also Myuri’s.

“Now, we are inspecting the treasure vault based on the father’s testimony.”

“Does the council take what the father has said as truth?”

Col inquired as they walked down the hall, and Theore smiled, slightly perplexed.

“Of course not. The vault was completely empty. That is too much for a single broker to make away with just after being let in.”

That was the logical conclusion.

“However, we are considering that the father may have done it. That is how we’ve found ourselves here.”

“How?”

It was impossible without magic.

The moment he thought that, Theore skillfully leaned in close to him and whispered.

“There are all sorts of secret passages and hidden rooms in the cathedral. By using those, he could have gone through the cape and carried it out to the sea in secret.”

“ ... ”

Col stared back at Theore in shock, and the man only responded with a shrug.

“That is information that no one else should know, but that is better than being under suspicion for theft from the vault. It is too late to regret it once the

rope to hang you is already around your neck.”

It was certainly a measure of desperation.

But if that were the case, then Habbot must have been the priest himself after all. Col was frustrated with himself because the judgment he cast upon others was truly clouded. Meanwhile, Theore gave a loud sigh.

“That being said, the biggest problem is that the father himself is not aware of where all the secret passages are.”

“Huh?”

Col looked back at him, and Theore had scrunched up his nose.

“The father must be holding out on us. After the dispute with the kingdom, he must have taken out the treasures on his own—either to save himself or to earn money, I don’t know—then either hid or sold them. Then, with the possibility of that all coming to light through tax collection, he is trying to trick us by using any means necessary.”

If that were the case, then was the priest actually Habbot the shepherd? The real stingy, greedy priest had no reason to hesitate telling them about a secret exit.

Habbot was surprised when he saw a secret vault deeper inside the regular vault, which sat between the prayer room and the altar. Then, if it happened twice, a third time was likely. It was typical for people to think that there must be other sorts of secrets. He understood the feeling of wanting to bet on the possibility that there was a secret exit.

And in order to steal treasure from the vault, it did not seem likely anyone would use the path from the point. Anyone walking there was entirely exposed to the town, and there were beggars who hung out around the foot, so it was difficult to sneak up without getting caught, even at night.

“And so, everyone is searching for that secret passage?”

“We have to. It is quite difficult to believe everything the father had said, but to not believe it would mean that the one who stole it was the father. We have to report this to the king, and once it comes to that, he will likely be hanged. If

we put a holy man and servant of God on the gallows under false accusation, then the town of Desarev will be cursed.”

They were here doing this after a lot of conjecture and speculation.

On the other hand, the mountain of treasure in the vault had, without a doubt, disappeared somewhere.

They say that sometimes a hidden whirlpool beneath calm waters would try to pull passing ships under.

And that was when Ilenia came in.

“If that’s the case, then I, too, will help...”

Col started as he looked at Myuri, who was perfect for finding hidden passages, but that was when he realized something. If he asked for Myuri’s help, it would not be difficult to determine whether or not the secret passages existed. The problem was, whether they existed or not, what happened after.

Because if they found them, then Ilenia would be at a disadvantage.

But if she actually stole treasures, and if the secret passages really existed, then there was no doubt she used them in her theft. Would it go against God’s teachings to know about them but not point them out? Even though it would save Ilenia if the hidden passages stayed hidden?

And it did not end there.

Once Ilenia was saved, Habbot would instead be hanged for a crime he was not guilty of.

It was only now that Col was walking along a terribly thin line.

It was dark, and he could only see a little bit ahead of him. The road extended to both the left and the right. Which way should he go? Who and what should he believe?

Of course, the best option was to find out who really stole the treasure.

But humans were not the all-knowing, all-powerful God, and God was typically absent.

His feet soon grew heavy, and the darkness inside the cathedral felt even

heavier.

Candles were lit on the candelabra that were dotted along the corridor.

They followed the light and soon came to the entrance of the vault.

There were three others dressed the same as Theore, and they were conversing, greatly perplexed.

When they noticed them, they all removed their hats at once. They must have once been merchants.

“The father and Sir Sligh are inside.”

They encouraged them, and Col and Theore went inside. The vault was filled with miscellaneous objects as usual; the shelf that was the door to the secret entrance was open, and Sligh was peeking inside.

“Oh, Sir Col.”

“I heard about the situation on the way. How is it?”

“This is an old cathedral, so it’s hard to say where things might be, and we’re talking long ago, when real pirates lived in the northern islands. I heard that at the time, there was a war where this cathedral was the last bastion. The vault inside this small opening must have been made in the case of a siege.”

When Col stood in the doorway, he felt the wind pass from behind him into the corridor. There was a hole somewhere and the air was flowing toward it.

He placed his hands on the weathered walls and thought back to the past. Those who were attacked by pirates and came running here took up spears and axes at the end of the small passage and waited for their enemies. The enemy could only come in one at a time and could not swing their arms about as they pleased, so even the weaker elderly and women could fight well enough.

A perfect place to put away treasures was also a perfect place to protect people’s lives.

“Is the father inside?”

“Yes. He says there must be a secret passage and that there is no doubt the broker made off with the treasure from there. The young lady broker in the

midst of this all is also there.”

Sligh also sounded a bit annoyed with Habbot’s excuses, but to Habbot, his life was on the line. Of course, so was Ilenia’s.

However, he could still not see what would be the right answer in this case. He could not sit in two chairs at once.

What he could do was choose not to place the two chairs side by side in the first place.

“I think that the father’s statement is nonsense.”

“Indeed. I think he is just afraid that it will be discovered that he dealt with the assets himself.”

Sligh spoke coolly. Considering how the cathedral and other organizations from the Church have acted so far throughout the kingdom, Col thought it was a natural response.

“I will have a little talk with the father.”

“Very well. I will search other places with my subordinates.”

Col could see a faint light at the end of the corridor, so he did not bring a candle with him. The steps were steep, so he let Myuri go first and took her hand, supporting her as they went down.

Then, like going down the staircase, he went deep into his thoughts.

This problem would not be solved by borrowing Myuri’s power. They had to convince Habbot to retract his statement that Ilenia was the culprit, then show the townspeople that he was innocent. But what if Habbot was not a shepherd but the real priest? What if he really did steal the treasure?

Furthermore, if when they learned the truth that Habbot was the priest and the culprit, could Col agree with the decision to send him to the gallows?

He should be held responsible if he had preyed on the townspeople and accumulated wealth for a long time, then used those assets to protect himself. Even a child would have their arm cut off if they stole bread. Had he managed to secure massive amounts of money, then no god’s protection would be able to save him.

Sins must be punished.

In the end, it was whether or not he was prepared for it.

Was he prepared to live not in a land of pleasure and warm, bubbling waters but in a merciless, wild world?

“Myuri, I—”

And just at that moment.

“Brother!”

Myuri whirled around and screamed.

When she tried to force herself past him in the narrow corridor, it was already too late.

The door shut behind them, and there came the sound of the lock.

“Hey!”

She managed to slip past him and practically galloped up the stairs to cling to the door, but there only came the sound of rusted metal scratching. There was a thick metal sheet on the back of the shelf.

She turned back to him and took the small pouch of wheat in her hand in the darkness. She wanted to return to her wolf form.

But he could neither agree nor disagree with her decision.

He could only think about Sligh on the other side of the door.

“Why?”

That was the word he came to. Sligh had shut them in. It was not a mistake or an accident. To lock the shelf, one would have to get on their knees and stick their hand under the boards.

Unsteadily, he made his way up the stairs and, over Myuri’s head, pounded the metal sheet.

“Why?!”

Of course, there was no answer. But in reality, he did not need to ask. Everyone’s actions spoke the truth louder than their words.

It was none other than Sligh who had stolen the treasures from the vault.

He did not feel anger, not even surprise.

The only thing in his heart was great disappointment.

“Brother?”

Myuri looked up from Col’s embrace with red eyes.

She may be able to rip the metal lid to shreds with her fangs and claws.

But he had one worry.

“In such a small place like this?”

Myuri was a slender girl in her human form, but she was big enough in her wolf form for Col to ride.

Her eyes lost a bit of redness, as though she had not thought of that, and she looked around, irritated.

“...My head might...fit...”

“It is much too dangerous to try that here. Let’s go farther in for now.”

She nodded reluctantly and followed him in.

Then in the room at the end of the corridor was Ilenia, bound and collapsed on the floor.

“Ilenia?!”

Myuri leaped forward and stopped just as she was about to touch her shoulder. Ilenia was unconscious. Myuri leaned forward with her nose to see if she had any injuries, then sniffed around her neck.

“She’s just unconscious. There’s a bump on her head, though...”

She must have been lured into this room, then hit on the head from behind.

“Ilenia? Ilenia?”

She unbound her, then lightly tapped her cheek as she called out to her.

Ilenia finally groaned faintly and slowly opened her eyes.

“Myu...ri?”

“Oh, phew. Are you okay?”

Ilenia cradled her head as she slowly sat up.

When she finally managed to get up, she smiled sheepishly.

“What a foolish lamb I am. I was caught so easily in this trap.”

She took a long sigh, then spoke, as though having recomposed herself.

“But you saved me again.”

When she said that, both Col and Myuri’s expressions tensed. Ilenia soon did the same and looked at the narrow passage behind them.

“Or could it be...?”

They would not just be getting out of this after being tricked.

“Yes. We, too, have just been shut in here.”

Discouragement did not appear on her face due to her merchantlike composure. Or perhaps, she felt relieved she was not alone anymore.

For the moment, Col decided to confirm the situation.

“...Was the one who locked you in here Mr. Sligh from the Debau Company? We were told you were charged with theft, and everyone was gathering here to investigate, and so we were brought here.”

“The same happened to me. It was probably Sligh who planned this. I...don’t think the father did it. I haven’t seen him since I was called here. He might already be dead, or he ran off after being bribed.”

Col shivered when he heard her say that as she dropped her gaze, searching her memory.

He prayed it was the latter.

“But I should have noticed...For someone to steal from this vault, they have to be, without a doubt, a local. Even if the father did it, it would take time. It’s hard to imagine he managed this with everything going on between the Church and the kingdom. Which means we should have been more cautious. There were plenty of chances for our actions to leak to the culprits...”

Even when they had been collecting information about Ilenia, Sligh had caught notice of it through his web of information. Merchants who took root in towns lived in that sort of world.

“So where is the secret escape route the father talked about?”

Ilenia made an expression asking for pity and looked to a corner of the room.

“I think it’s just a rumor. There’s just a small vent over there.”

That was why the air flowed through when the door was open.

“But...I just keep thinking how strange this is. How were all the treasures smuggled out of here? Even Habbot...I mean, the father did not know this existed.”

Habbot’s name accidentally slipped out when he spoke, and Ilenia chuckled.

“Did he confess to you, Sir Col?”

“...Did you know?”

“It’s a tacit understanding in this town. He is the only one who thinks he’s fooling anyone. That is why he’s being used.”

He almost pointed out that she was the same, but he noticed her meaningful gaze.

“Right. That was my chance for success when I first knocked on the door. But...you saw how that ended. A sheep can’t win against a shepherd.”

He hesitated for a moment as to whether or not he should laugh, and Ilenia continued speaking.

“It must have been because I was hit on the head, but I realized how they were stealing things the moment I knew Sligh was the mastermind.”

As she said this, Col unconsciously looked toward the shelves. What was left there were large objects that should have been stolen straight away.

“The food delivery.”

“...Oh.”

Were there more uphill or downhill in the world?

The only path to the cathedral were the stairs from the foot of the cape, and it was plainly visible for all the town to see, and the beggars were watching.

If so, then there were only two possibilities. Either devise a way so that no one could see, or be in a position that would not cause problems if others saw. It was only the merchants who brought in food supplies who were the exception, who would not be doubted by anyone else.

And much like how uphill must eventually go downhill, those who brought in cargo could quickly change roles to someone who carried things away. That there were only large things left here meant that it was too big to take away in relation to the food they brought in, and they could not hide it as they carried it out.

“It is a fundamental rule of trade to get rid of empty loads. You make much more that way.”

“That was why Mr. Sligh was surprised when he heard that the collection went well...He must have known that we could not have collected fifty gold pieces’ worth without getting to this room.”

“I’m sure he paid the beggars to keep an eye on us, so he also must have known that we weren’t carrying a mountain of household effects or giant gold platters.”

“So he realized that you’d found something small but incredibly valuable. And that the treasure could be nowhere else but the secret vault. Along that line of thinking, it is obvious they realized that others saw their misdeeds, so they beat us to the punch before we could find out they were the culprits...”

Col sighed as he spoke and found himself impressed in a way by how shrewd merchants were.

Ilenia continued.

“Incidentally, they must have checked to see if there were other treasures left. They probably could not go as far to get the story out from the father.”

When she said that, Myuri stood, went into a corner of the room that the candlelight could not reach, then came back.

She was dragging a large cloth that looked like wool behind her. It must be the cloth that was wrapped around the boxes with the relics. Sligh and the others must not have thought it was very important.

“This is all that’s left. All those moldy boxes are gone, just traces of a hole they greedily dug, probably to check if there was anything else under it. It’s probably big enough for all of us to fit inside.”

Myuri smiled mischievously. She must have imagined Sligh and company desperately digging a hole.

“But, Brother?”

“Yes?”

“Is this the time to be sitting around chatting?”

Her eyes said that sins must be paid for.

But there was something that still bothered him.

“What does Mr. Sligh plan on doing with us?”

Ilenia’s face became pensive again.

“...If he simply wanted to silence us, it would have been faster for him to drop us off the cliff. So to gather us all together like this...perhaps he means to pin the blame on us. Everyone will eventually find out that there have been thefts. So without a culprit, someone will notice the truth.”

“But how?”

Even if they were handed over to the city council in this situation, he could not imagine they would immediately be beheaded as per bandit law. They would be put on trial, and he did not think that would be against their favor.

Because if the council got involved and they were put on trial, he would, rather, have a greater chance in his favor, since the royal Hyland was on his side. And above everything else, the townspeople regarded him well, calling him a cardinal. There was without a doubt that things would move forward in their favor.

Sligh should know that and Ilenia as well.

So he was especially puzzled by Sligh's actions.

"Come on, you guys, what are you talking about?"

An irritated Myuri cut in.

"The treasures were stolen from here, right? If there's people here, then they're the culprits."

Myuri loved pranks and was always brought back and scolded at the scene of the crime. She must have many experiences of times where excuses did not cut it.

But this was not a child's world.

"That might be so, but there are things called trials in society, and by talking to one another, that is how they discover the truth—"

There, his words cut off.

Discover the truth by talking to one another?

He unwittingly looked around him. This was a room enclosed on all sides by stone walls with only one exit.

The priest was a fake, and those who called themselves council members were likely Sligh's trusted underlings, so the ones who knew the truth were few and far between. And people rarely ever came to the cathedral.

Would they be talking at a time like this?

That was absurd.

"The dead can't talk...you mean."

"Yes! That's why we've gotta get out of here and get 'em!"

Myuri pulled some wheat from her pouch and put it into her mouth, and began stripping off her clothes. Col was bewildered at how fast she was moving, but finally remembered she did not like him looking at her when she turned into a wolf, so he turned away and closed his eyes.

He opened his eyes when he felt fur rubbing against his cheek.

"My head might fit in the passage."

She put her head in the entrance to the corridor, went a bit farther in, then returned.

“I thought if I could throw myself at it, I could easily...”

She looked up at the passage, and her words cut off.

She then drew back in surprise.

Wondering what was wrong, Col saw a snake slithering down the stairs.

A snake?

“What is...this...? Water?”

He immediately knew what it was.

“Myuri, get back!”

The end of the hall suddenly went bright. The light immediately grew strong, and it wavered as it came down the steps.

“Ah, ah, ah!”

Myuri, who was afraid of only one thing in the world—her mother—tucked her tail between her legs and jumped back.

The snake continued down the steps with such wild energy.

It was a river of oil, wrapped in flames.

“Wh-what should we do, this...?”

Myuri looked at the end of the hall in a panic and tried many times to jump forward but always hesitated.

The fire quickly blocked the hall, and black smoke covered the ceiling.

They would not escape unharmed if they jumped into it.

The burning snake was slithering farther and farther into the room; there was nowhere to run.

Rather, the situation must have been good for him as Col kept himself together, knowing that they had no choice but to look around the room.

“Myuri, knock over all the cabinets!”

She understood in a second, so she turned to the side and began ramming into the shelves, pushing them into the flaming snake to turn it back. Though they were made of wood, they could stop oil. This room was surrounded by stone walls, so as long as they could keep the oil at bay, they would not go up in flames.

Myuri must have thought the same as she knocked over two, three shelves and piled them at the entrance of the corridor.

“...They were ready for this.”

The deepest parts of the room, where the candlelight had not reached, were now glowing a deep red. There was a big pile of firewood.

To make it all worse, burning oil poured in from the air vent in the ceiling, and that, too, was set on fire.

Places meant for keeping others out were also perfect for keeping people in.

“Burning us alive and the treasure while they’re at it will certainly round everything off nicely.”

Ilenia murmured with a half smile.

“Oooh...!”

Myuri growled and lowered herself, facing the burning wooden shelves.

Col felt the blood drain from his face, and he leaped at her.

“Myuri! Calm down! You can’t do it!”

“But we’ll burn to death here anyway! I might be able to open that door!”

She shook him off, and before he could call out to her, she disappeared into the corridor.

“Myuri!”

His voice and the loud echo of a banging on the door resounded at the same time.

He did not know if it was only a few seconds or long enough for him to take several deep breaths.

Before he realized it, a wolf jumped out from within the flames and black smoke.

“Agh...Ahhh!!”

Myuri could not stick the landing and instead collapsed on her side on the floor. There was a faint smoke rising from her body, and he could see small flames between her claws on her front and back paws.

“What did you do?!”

She did not try to stand, either because the smoke had gotten into her eyes or from the pain of her burning paws. Col immediately leaped toward her and cupped both his hands around her paws.

The fire burned his hands, and there came a sizzling sound.

With Ilenia’s help, Col desperately tried to hold Myuri down as she raged either from pain or confusion, and he continued to put the fire out with his hands. When he finally managed to put the fire out on her back foot, she calmed, panting heavily.

The fire continued to rage, and it was so hot and bright he could barely keep his eyes open.

“...I’m sorry, Brother. I couldn’t open the door...”

Myuri lay limp on the floor.

“Don’t push yourself too hard.”

As he spoke, she lifted her head, looking at him with red eyes.

“You tell me to be ladylike even when I’m about to die?”

She half-laughed in disbelief, and Col could not help but smile as well.

“Of course.”

She sighed and tried to stand up as her body trembled.

“Myuri, lay back down.”

“No. Everyone’ll die if I don’t open that door. If we’re going to be burned alive, then we may as well do everything we can first.”

But the door did not open with her first attack. He did not think anything would come of it if she tried again while her feet were burned. There was no way he could simply watch her jump into the flames over and over, still injured, as she slowly died in pain.

If there was nothing else for him to do, all he could say was this.

“Then I’ll lay down in the corridor, and you walk over me.”

“What on earth?! I couldn’t do—”

Just as they had begun to fight—

“I have an idea.”

Ilenia spoke up.

“An idea?”

They were in an underground room, surrounded on all sides by stone walls, with the only exit blocked. The firewood and buckets filled with oil placed about the room were at last turning it into an oven.

The inside of Col’s body was growing hot, and breathing seemed as if it would burn his lungs. At the very least, he could pray to God in what little time he had left, devote himself to saving his soul so that he would not succumb to hate and anger and go to hell.

Then Ilenia placed a sword before them. It was from a set of armor left in the room.

“I will become a sheep, so you should cut open my stomach and use the blood to put out the fire.”

“...Huh?”

“My intestines will probably help in stopping the fire from spreading. Then when you’ve taken everything out, hide inside. Parchment is sometimes found unscathed after a monastery goes up in flames, and you know how much trouble it is to fully roast pigs and sheep, right? It does not cook very easily.”

She spoke indifferently, and Col stared back at her blankly.

“...Is this a joke?”

“Is this the time for jokes?”

She smiled bitterly in response.

“If we do nothing, we all will die. It’s better for just one to die than all three.”

It was perhaps her merchantlike way of calculating loss and profit. And her hard-boiled plan was much too logical. Myuri was not too big, and they could not hide in her stomach.

But Ilenia had such giant hooves.

“And if you ration out the fire-roasted parts, you could survive quite a long time.”

That had to be a joke.

“No! No, no!”

Myuri screamed like a child. Of course, Col felt the same way.

“We can’t do that. Absolutely not.”

“Could you say the same thing if our positions were flipped?”

Her gaze threatened to pierce right through him.

If he were not a pathetic lamb of God but a giant sheep. If he could save someone by sacrificing himself, like how a mother bird protected her nest...

Then what would he do?

Damn it, he cursed God.

He would do the same.

“...And yet—”

“I am the one who got you into this mess in the first place.”

Silence fell over them.

Time ticked away in that room, where there was no moment for respite.

The flames burned stronger and stronger.

“Well then.”

Ilenia stood.

Col could not say anything, only follow her with his eyes. Myuri was saying something in a howl, but he could not hear it. His impertinent reasoning was whispering arguments at him—*Didn't both humans and wolves eat sheep to live?* He felt like he was going to give in to the temptation of possibly surviving this predicament.

No. This was not something he could allow, but at the same time, it was painful to refuse.

Could he allow Ilenia to die in vain, then watch as Myuri burned to death? Was that all meaningless?

His logic and emotion were fanned by the flames, and he felt as though he were going insane.

Is there no reprieve for them? Is this not a house of God?!

“Erm, please, if you don't mind looking away...”

Ilenia spoke bashfully, and she sounded young when she did so. It was not strange at all that she was naive enough to truly believe that there was a new land at the edge of the sea.

If he looked away now, that would be accepting her command. They would cut her stomach open, and only he and Myuri would survive. His body would not move even when he tried to move it, perhaps because of how stretched out time felt in the face of death.

Then his vision blurred at a sudden impact, and he fell to the floor.

Myuri the wolf was holding him down.

“Ilenia, my claws and fangs are sharper.”

Ilenia replied.

“Okay.”



He did not try to resist as he lay on the floor because he knew deep down that this was the best option for everyone.

Myuri's claws dug into his shoulder painfully. It seemed like she knew that if she did not do that, he would try to get up.

He thought as he was stuck to the floor.

God had not given them a miracle when they were in the northern islands.

The only ones fighting in the present were those who were worshipped as gods in an ancient age, then forgotten.

Though he honestly knew how powerless faith was, anger welled up within him as he wondered if he should simply throw himself into the flames. He stared at the fire, almost expecting an angel to extend a hand in salvation, even though he knew his wishes would never reach heaven, even though he knew that nothing would happen...

"Huh?"

He lifted his head and spotted it. He did not mind the claws digging into his shoulders.

"Please, Brother. Don't let Ilenia's last wish go to waste."

He did not even look over at Myuri as she pleaded, and instead he stared at that one thing.

"Myuri."

"Brother!"

He then responded clearly to her irritated cry.

"Myuri, look!"

He pointed to the corner of the room. Lying there was a normal-looking piece of cloth. It was thick, rather hard, and oddly heavy. It was the same sort of material as Saint Nex's cloth.

It was not made from animal hair, plant fiber, or insect silk. Sligh said it must have been made out of metal.

It did not matter.

The cloth was engulfed in flames but was not burning.

"...What is that...? It's not burning?"

Myuri looked at the saint's cloth and murmured, puzzled.

"Myuri, the cloth!"

He repeated himself, and she let go of his shoulder, as though overwhelmed.

"Get the cloth!"

Myuri dashed off, picked it up with her mouth, and immediately came back. She placed it before him, the confused look still on her face.

"It's...not hot at all. Isn't it supposed to be metal? Is it really metal?"

Even children knew that metals immediately grew hot.

Ilenia, who had just offered up her life, was also looking at the cloth, defeated.

"This fabric was covering everything when we opened the hidden door, right?"

What was a holy relic's most powerful foe? No, what sort of benefits did Saint Nex give as a patron saint? Threads remain unbroken, cloth uneaten by bugs. And...

"No fires."

This was a real relic.

Goose bumps spread all over his back, and he fought back the urge to sob.

"This is...this is protection from God!"

He took the cloth in hand and inspected it. It was not burned anywhere, and as Myuri said, it was not even hot. It had not been placed over the other relics merely for decoration.

"I suggest we cover ourselves with the cloth and hide."

He looked at Ilenia, who stood in place, and Myuri as he spoke.

“And we will all survive.”

Sligh and the others had dug an even deeper hole out of greed where the relics had been hidden.

Luckily, both Ilenia and Myuri were small, slender girls. All three of them could somehow fit inside, but the problem was, the hole was long and in a cylindrical shape.

“Ilenia, don’t lie down! Brother, you lie down on your stomach!”

The bottom of the hole was narrow, only big enough for one person to lie in it. Both Myuri and Ilenia were skinny, so if either were on the bottom, they would likely die under the pressure of two other bodies on top of them.

In the end, Col was at the bottom with Myuri and Ilenia on top, but Myuri was still saying things like that even now. She must have been worried about something happening in such a small place with the opposite sex.

“Don’t be rude to Miss Ilenia...”

He sounded annoyed, but Myuri jumped on him and he could not finish his sentence.

“P-pardon me.”

Hesitatingly, Ilenia also sat on him. And the two on him insisted that just in case the saint’s cloth could not keep back the flames, they could manage something with their fur.

As he felt their weight on his back, the grown man had mixed feelings about where he lay in this safe space. God had given this pathetic lamb a miracle, but he prayed desperately, as though giving excuses for how shamelessly two girls sat on top of him.

Then he felt Myuri chuckle on his back “...What is it?”

She snorted, then responded.

“Hmm? I was just excited to rip those guys to shreds once the fire goes out.”

“Be ladylike, even in the face of death.”

He had certainly said that, but they were now in a hole, which was covered by

a saint's cloth that would not let fire in.

It was unlikely God could hear them.

"Stop moving around so much."

"Okay."

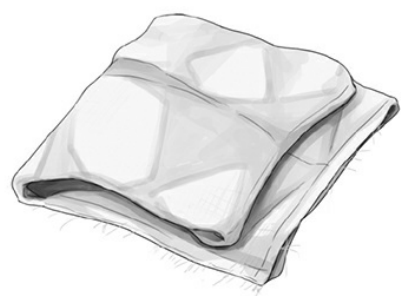
Ilenia chuckled as she listened to their conversation.

Everything had changed so quickly in the town of Desarev, and they had been made fools.

But earth would return to earth, and dust would return to dust. The truth would, without a doubt, reveal itself as the truth. Col's wavering faith once more retook its shape.

The fire continued to rage, but their path was, once again, headed in the direction of their wishes.

ÉPILOGUE



EPILOGUE

Though the fire died down after midnight, they had made a miscalculation. There was still the issue of the residual heat, and it was like an oven that was still hot enough to bake bread even after the firewood had run out, so the temperature did not go down very easily.

While the saint's cloth kept them from having direct contact with the fire and heat, it did not keep away the heat that surrounded the hole they were hiding in. Had they stayed there any longer, they either would have roasted to death or collapsed from thirst.

That did not happen because as the remains of the shelves in the corner of the room were smoldering, the door to the vault opened.

Without any time to breathe in the cool, fresh air that had filled the room, Myuri bounded up, became a wolf, and jumped out. When the other two stumbled out of the vault, she had already struck down most of the bad guys, and when they finally caught up to her, she was just intimidating the ones hiding under the altar as she pulled them out.

Col and Ilenia tied up all the unconscious men, and there were eight of them in total. Col thought Sligh, the mastermind himself, had returned to the trading house, but he had been standing in front of the entrance to the vault and he was the first to receive Myuri's blessings.

Though Col was rather surprised about that, there were dark circles under the eyes of the collapsed man, and he was so haggard he looked like a different person than he was the night before. He might have had a more stressful night than they did.

He might have thought that there really was a secret exit and they had escaped to town, or perhaps he had been tormented by guilt. What made him think that was not his good-naturedness that always annoyed Myuri but because the scripture lay open beside him.

After Myuri checked around to see if there were any others who were hiding or escaped, they found jugs of water in the kitchen annexed to the cathedral and drank some cold water.

It was only then that he could relax, knowing he had been saved. Both he and Ilenia sunk to the floor in such relief and could not even open their mouths, but Myuri was different.

Once she found the food that Sligh and the others had brought in, she carried off an armful as she tried to go off somewhere in excitement. Suspicious, Col called out to her, and she said she would be frying an egg, curing meat, and toasting some bread while the stones in the vault were still hot. The faint light of dawn filtered through the skylights, so it was like an early breakfast.

Without any energy to get mad, he just saw her off.

And there was something he needed to think about more than breakfast: how to tidy this all up.

What should they do with Sligh and his men, who were tied up in a small room? The next logical step was to hand them over to the city council as the treasure thieves, but he was worried if such a simple thing was all right to do.

As he was thinking about that, there came the echo of a knock at the cathedral door, and his heart leaped.

Myuri was in the underground room. With no one else to depend on, he looked at Ilenia, and Ilenia was tilting her head, looking toward the main entrance.

“...Fish?”

He had an idea of who it might be when she said that. He quickly ran along the side aisle and opened the door, and there was exactly whom he had expected: Autumn.

“Oh, you’re all right.”

Autumn’s hair and beard were dripping wet, and he glanced at the giant bird sitting on his shoulder. The hawk-like bird gave a shrill cry.

“He said you might be burned alive, so I drank a lake’s worth of water.”

Col was not sure how much of that was true, but he got the gist of the situation.

“It’s true we were trapped in an underground room, and it was set on fire. We are safe thanks to God’s protection.”

The man who had even temporarily called himself a monk only glumly shrugged his shoulders.

They then came across Myuri, who was stuffing her face with the breakfast she made from the fire that had just tried to kill them, and they gave a brief explanation of what happened the night before. Autumn offered the dangerous idea of dealing with Sligh and the others by abandoning them on a small island somewhere. He said they were then free to escape as they pleased.

Though that raised the question of what to do if they did escape, Autumn’s idea was still rather amicable.

Not only had Sligh tried to lay the blame on them and kill them, they had also stolen the treasures from the cathedral. If they handed them over to the city council, they would not escape being sent to the gallows, no matter how much they struggled.

While Col knew that sins should be punished, he recalled that Sligh might have spent the night reading the scripture, so it could also be thought of as a reckless act after having lost self-control. And if word got out that Sligh was the culprit, then the Debau Company’s reputation would plummet in Desarev, and that might affect the entirety of the company. He wanted to avoid that.

Having said that, it was very unlikely he would be acquitted.

Myuri and Ilenia agreed to go along with Autumn’s plan, and they all looked at Col, who was trying to show lenience, with eyes half filled with annoyance and criticism, but he had an even better plan.

When he explained it, Myuri only stared blankly at him, but Ilenia and Autumn shuddered instead.

“You are sometimes cruel.”

“Yes, I don’t think...”

He thought their reactions were exaggerated, and that it would absolutely benefit them much more than exiling them to a small, distant island.

When he stated that, he got no more arguments.

But there was one problem. He required Autumn and the bird for his plan to work.

Myuri won over the bird by giving it a piece of cured meat that was dripping with oil, but Autumn only morosely said the following.

“I will think of this as my way of paying back what I owe you several times over.”

Then Myuri, who was slurping out the fried egg sandwiched between the bread, licked away the piece of yolk stuck to her mouth and smiled at Autumn.

“If it’s too much, then I’ll go dig some holes for you, and my brother will help me out.”

Coal mines supported the livelihoods of the people of the north, and Myuri, with her nose and claws, would be able to find new coal veins.

After a while of weighing the pros and cons on the scales, Autumn finally sighed in defeat.

“...Oh well.”

“Thank you.”

When they saw Autumn, whom Col had kept working since the day before, off from the island, the sun was just barely showing its face above the horizon.

“*Haaah*. I’m sleepy now after all that eating.”

Myuri yawned, standing before the marvelous view, and her tail wavered back and forth.

“It will be a while before Autumn and the others come back. Let’s take a rest.”

They of course had not slept since they spent the entire night in a burning room. Myuri was already beginning to stagger, so Col held her up, and they began to make their way back to the cathedral.

He stopped in place because Ilenia had not moved, staring out to sea.

But she was not looking east toward the rising sun but to the west, where it set.

“About making a country in the land far west...”

His words were so sudden it even surprised himself.

“How much of that is true?”

Myuri, who had been on the verge of melting, suddenly tensed.

Ilenia’s face, gazing out to the western sea, was half covered in soot.

When she looked back at him, there was a strange expression on her face.

“Why?”

“You work for the Bolan Company, don’t you?”

Two seabirds took flight from the point and quickly vanished into the sky.

“Yes, but what about it?”

“Eve Bolan is an old acquaintance. I was thinking, perhaps, that you might be trying to curry favor with the prince so that Mrs. Bolan can take back her title.”

Ilenia’s eyes widened.

She only gave him a troubled smile afterward.

“I can’t say I didn’t think about that, but...Lady Bolan does not want her title back.”

Of course, she could say whatever she wanted. It just came down to whether he should believe her or not.

The girl in Col’s arms pinched at him, as though telling him he should.

He felt overwhelmed, but not because of Myuri.

It was because Ilenia was staring at him with a defiant gaze, a fearless smile across her face.

“Because Lady Bolan is planning on monopolizing our trade with the human world if we found our own country in the west. She only ever does things for profit. She decided to work with me not out of compassion but for coin. She would not be happy with such insignificance as titles.”

Ilenia once said she wanted to get rich enough to bring her employer's youth back.

And her employer was just every bit a wolf in sheep's clothing as she was.

That was Col's initial thought, but he realized his mistake.

"You're like a sheep in sheep's clothing."

Ilenia stared blankly at him, then gave him a vague smile.

"Is that a compliment?"

"The next time someone likens me to a sheep, I will be proud."

She chuckled.

"I'm going to look at the view a little more. Please, you two, go ahead and rest."

By her ambitious smile, he could clearly tell she did not say that out of consideration.

It was as though she was telling them, if they did not believe her, they just needed to keep watching.

Myuri was just about to bite into his arms, but he instead held her back even tighter, then spoke.

"Then we shall do so."

Of course, Ilenia was not surprised. She smiled and tilted her head slightly in a nod.

He coaxed Myuri and they returned to the cathedral, but for a little while, she was grouchy.

She must have not liked how he doubted Ilenia but also the possibility that there was some sort of ulterior motive hidden in their words together.

He was finally starting to understand what made her jealous.

"Don't go anywhere while I'm sleeping."

"Okay, okay."

She looked like she wanted to say more, but instead she wrapped her arms

around him and closed her eyes still sulking. He heard her snoozing peacefully soon after. He was just as tired.

He drifted off in an instant, and the next time he opened his eyes, the man he was looking for stood before them, smiling wryly.

“It has been quite the long while. How are your studies?”

The man, who had a long beard and calm demeanor, was getting on in his years, and looked at the sleeping Myuri with narrowed eyes like a fond grandfather.

“I’m sorry for having you come all the way here, Mr. Hilde.”

Col adjusted his posture, and Myuri finally awoke.

The one he had asked Autumn and the bird to bring from the mainland was a great merchant who kept the books at the Debau Company, whose power extended throughout the entirety of the northlands and was big enough to produce a currency called the coin of the sun and was also supporting their journey: Hilde Schnau.

As a merchant, Ilenia of course knew Hilde’s name, but she was surprised to learn that he was not human. Hilde was the embodiment of a small rabbit, and with his small size, he managed to get here from Debau’s main branch with the cooperation of the bird and Autumn.

“I heard the story on the way. Your judgment was correct in calling on me. This reminds me of Sir Lawrence from all those years ago.”

Hilde gazed around the room where Sligh and the others were being held.

“I’ve been keeping my eye on the Desarev trading house; they were making too much money. I was investigating, knowing they were up to no good, pilfering goods or the sort—smuggling, essentially, but to think they were stealing from the cathedral.”

He sighed and shook his head.

“I’ll deal with them. If you handed them over to the council, all they would do is send them to hang. I will make them tell me where the stolen treasure is, and I’ll have them work hard under my supervision for repayment. How does that

sound?”

Col agreed of course, but Ilenia and Autumn, as always, did not seem very enthusiastic.

He dubiously wondered why they seemed that way, and Hilde’s shoulders shook in laughter.

“No need to worry. I won’t be forcing them to work in the mines until they perish.”

“Oh.”

One of the few jobs just as cruel as rowing a galley was mining. Being exiled to a distant island was more than preferable to being chained up and fearing lung disease and cave-ins while working.

That meant Autumn and Ilenia had quite forgiving hearts.

The only one left was Myuri, and the girl who had cooked her breakfast in the fire that tried to kill them simply shrugged her shoulders in disinterest.

And so it was settled.

As Col sighed in relief, Hilde’s face scrunched when he caught a whiff of the burning odor that had hitched a ride on the wind, then spoke.

“But how on earth did you manage to avoid staying trapped in that room and burned alive?”

Col suddenly recalled something at Hilde’s curious question.

“It was the protection of a relic. A true relic.”

Though it had saved their lives, he completely forgot about it. He could not even say *Once ashore, pray no more* even in jest.

He rushed to the vault, which was still hot even after such time passed, and he brought back the saint’s cloth.

“This is it. We were saved by the cloth of Saint Nex.”

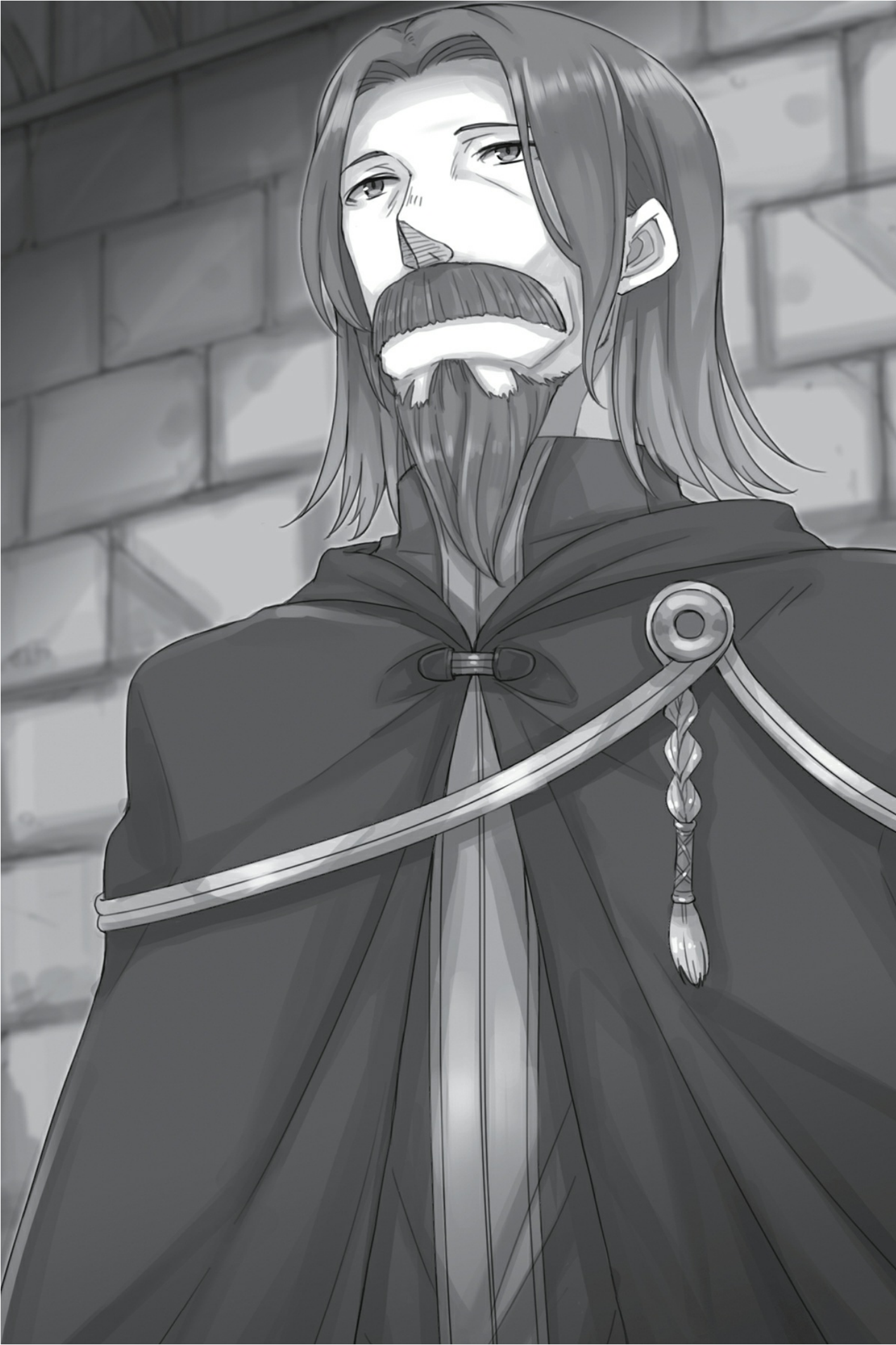
“Oh?”

As a servant of God, he proudly showed off the cloth, and Hilde just tilted his

head, stroked it, then nodded slowly.

He then looked at Col, his eyes apologetic.

“Mr. Col, I know how fervently faithful you are.”



After such a preliminary remark, he continued.

“But this cloth did not save you with a saint’s protection.”

He hesitated in his next words, and surprisingly, it was Ilenia who interjected.

“What is this cloth made of anyway? I have no possible idea of what it might be.”

Myuri looked on curiously, and even Autumn the whale seemed rather interested.

Hilde looked around at the others, and after clearing his throat, he answered.

“It’s ore.”

Then, after a momentary blank stare, Myuri laughed and casually hit the man’s arm.

“Old man Hilde, he’ll believe you, you know? He even says there’s a plant that sprouts sheep on its branches and that they make fabric out of that.”

Col looked at Myuri, since that was just one legend about cotton, but Hilde did not even smile.

“Well, it’s close to that, and I understand if you don’t believe it. But the world mercilessly smashes all conjecture and assumptions we have about it. This cloth is made from stone.”

No matter how he looked at it, Col held cloth in his hands.

But it was true that it did not catch fire, nor did it grow hot. There was no way it was a regular cloth, nor was it metal.

“It’s called asbestos and is found in mines. Mining is the backbone of the Debau Company, but rarely do we ever see something as nice as this. It certainly is a miracle. I’ve truly seen something great here today.”

It seemed Hilde was genuinely impressed.

Col was even more shocked to learn that cloth could be woven out of stone than he was when he learned about the continent to the west.

If that was possible, then anything could happen.

Myuri was so surprised she was practically unconscious.

“Well then, I will take care of my lowly subordinates. Why don’t you all return to town for now and get some rest?”

They had spent the night in a burning vault. Their exhaustion would not disappear with a short nap.

And finally, after hearing the secret of Saint Nex’s cloth, Col felt limp.

Autumn was rather fond of such a large stone building and decided to stay and look at it for a while, so Col, Myuri, and Ilenia all left the cathedral.

And as always, they were met with a beautiful view outside.

A clear blue sky and the smell of the sea on the wind. But within that mystical scenery were ships out fishing, departing trade ships, the lives of those who worked at the port, and seabirds flying freely through the air.

The world was full of surprises, rich with change, and perhaps could never be forced into a single shape.

So there were parts of it that could get better by their actions.

It was hard for him to say that everything concerning the land to the west that Ilenia spoke about, and the truth about the Church in the kingdom, including Heir Klevend, was still uncertain.

But suppose the truth about all that was headed in a bad direction, then he felt as though he could now stand up strongly against it.

He grasped Myuri’s hand, and Ilenia smiled at them as they went down the stairs.

They only realized that someone was approaching them on the steps after a flock of seabirds flew overhead.

“Mr. Habbot?!”

Col unwittingly called his name, and Habbot, who stared at his feet with a brooding expression as he walked, lifted his head as he jumped.

“S-Sir Col?”

His body then trembled, and he collapsed on the spot.

Col frantically rushed to his side, and Habbot clasped his hands together in prayer to God.

“I’m so glad you came back...I didn’t know if I could ever stand before God again...”

He murmured on the verge of tears, but Col had something he wanted to ask.

“Did you see Mr. Sligh?”

“Yes.”

Habbot continued, as though confessing to his sins.

“He then told me I could either take the money or die. They were the ones who stole the treasure from the vault, right?”

Ilenia’s thinking was correct in that Sligh either paid Habbot off or, at the worst, had him killed.

“He must have already known I was a fake. I thought that even if I managed to make it to the council, they would not listen to a fake like me. So I took the sack of money.”

Habbot spoke painfully, but he raised his head hopefully.

Because he was here now.

“I took the money, but my head was filled with other things. I am not the only one who knows about that vault. And if treasures were being stolen from it, then there needs to be a culprit. I knew immediately what they were going to do. I am a shepherd. I know very well who ends up being blamed in times like this.”

Disaster was always brought from outside a community.

And Col, Myuri, as well as Ilenia were not people of this town.

“I thought, maybe I should just keep quiet and run away. I am just a shepherd. But...”

After a night of anguish, Habbot had not run. The brooding face he wore as he walked up the steps suggested he was even ready to die for the justice that dwelled within him.

As long as it was accompanied by a fine paper of authentication and genesis, then even the shabbiest of cloths could be sold as a relic. And though Habbot was a fake, he had spent many years in the cathedral, wearing the clothes of the clergy.

“You are an excellent priest.”

Col put his hand on Habbot’s shoulder and spoke.

“You are more authentic than a real priest. I can attest to this.”

Habbot looked at him and smiled bitterly, as if the sun was too bright.

“God will show me what to do. But I want to somehow fulfill this temporary goal I have been given.”

Once Habbot, playing the priest’s role, returned to the cathedral, Hilde’s job of dealing with the men would become much easier. Col told him that Hilde, a leader from the Debau Company, was there and praised him once again for mustering the courage to return to the cathedral.

As they watched him walk up the steps, he straightened his back proudly.

No one would believe him if he said he was only a shepherd.

“He’s become the mask?”

Myuri seemed convinced.

“It certainly looks like it.”

He said calmly to her that the world is not something to be tossed away, and she gripped his hand tightly.

“Then I’m not gonna give up, either. If a shepherd can be a priest and a stone can become fabric, then it’s not like I can’t be your wife, right? ...*Ahem*, Brother?”

“...”

She wore a dauntless smile as she said “Brother” deliberately. While he found himself speechless at such an outrageous display, Ilenia stood beside them, smiling and enjoying the show.

“Well, for now I just want to take a bath and sleep in a big bed! I’m tired.”

“If you don’t mind the inn where I’m staying, I can arrange a room for you quickly.”

“I wanna sleep in Ilenia’s room. I think I’d have nice dreams there.”

Ilenia looked a bit surprised, but she nodded with a smile.

“You’re okay with that, right, Brother?”

She continued the conversation on her own. He was a lamb, and she was a wolf.

He could only shrug.

The sun stood high above their heads, and the seabirds cried cheerfully.

He prayed to God that this day and the next would be pleasant ones.

Sorry for canceling on you so suddenly, J-san.

My manuscript was so late this time that I must start with a personal message. I am sorry to all parties involved.

I remember that the third book of the series before *Wolf & Parchment—Spice & Wolf*—did not go according to plot at all, and the characters' ages and positions all changed so drastically I had to start over from the beginning. It was such hard work, but I think I managed to hand it in on time back then...And then I realize I must be getting old...I can't handle the time before deadlines like I used to. I think there are many of those among the readers who have been following the *Wolf* series since the beginning that are nodding right now! To the younger readers who have just picked up this series, please read this again in ten years. You will understand. And I will continue working hard to create books that my readers will retrieve from the shelves in another ten years.

What a collection of nice thoughts.

By the way, I bought a TV for the first time in my life the other day. In my teens, I believed that it was cool not to watch TV, and I just never got around to buying one until now, when I lost to the temptation of console games (I've always played games on PC).

And screens now are super huge and very clear. Not only that, but OLED TVs have been released at long last, and I thought that it won't be long until beautiful girls will be coming out of the screen. But the screens are so clear they hurt my eyes, and they're expensive anyway, so I got a regular one. To my greater surprise, you can watch YouTube and Netflix on it. I didn't understand when I saw those words in the control instructions at first. If you want to connect to the Internet, then you may as well have a browser. And since it's a pain to use the remote, you may as well add a mouse and a keyboard for input, and while you're at it, put lots of apps on it to use. That sounds like it could be a big business to me! I feel like I've seen a similar contraption somewhere before,

though.

Either way, whenever I venture out to the electronics store, I am surprised by how fast the world is moving. I hear a lot about AI, and I've heard there are authors making AI write novels. I have to catch up to the times...That is what I'm panicking about now. No, I should make sure I keep up with my deadlines before I keep up with the times.

And that's all for today.

I will see you in the next volume.

Isuna Hasekura

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